A Critical Study of Academic Acceleration in the Early Years in Singapore

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Declaration and Word Count

I, Denise Mei Ling CHUA, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Denise Mei Ling Chua

Abstract

In Singapore, there is an extensive shadow system of commercial enrichment schools and tuition centres that provide extracurricular lessons to young children. Unfortunately, acceleration has often been associated with negative perceptions. It has been described as stressful or developmentally inappropriate. There have been concerns that it contributes to intergenerational social immobility too. In this dissertation, I undertook a qualitative study to examine and analyse academic acceleration in the preschool years in Singapore. 12 sets of parents and children across three socioeconomic groups were interviewed, as well as 10 of the kindergarten teachers who taught these children in their regular preschool settings. Lessons in 5 out of 7 of the enrichment centres attended by the children were observed as well. Using Foucault's notion of "governmentality" and Bourdieu's conceptions of "habitus" and "capital", the study found that meritocracy and pragmatism are widely referenced in Singapore. However, socioeconomic class mediates the extent and manner of ideological uptake across individual families and children. At the same time, the neoliberal ethos that has given rise to the free market of enrichment schools in Singapore has contributed to a perpetuation of socioeconomic inequalities. Enrichment centres have themselves become geospatial sites for the performance and reproduction of "habitus" and various kinds of symbolic "capital". Although alternate possibilities exist, especially in the light of human agency, reforms to resolve these issues are constrained by the deeply embedded assumptions and political "technologies" that have led to the present sociocultural and

educational context for parents, young children and kindergarten teachers in Singapore. Whilst parents resisted ideological tenets occasionally, their resistance was primarily verbal and not enacted. Kindergarten teachers tended to maintain a silence about acceleration practices, even though they disapproved of them in private.

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Supporting Statement

Introduction

It has been seven years since I started on this EdD Dual Award programme and so much has changed in the various aspects of my life as wife, mother, teacher, preschool owner and citizen of Singapore. My eldest daughter is now in university and my middle child will commence studies in the Sixth Form next year. They were pre-teens when I `went back to school', their youngest sister a toddler. I was an idealistic and over-ambitious woman perhaps, thinking I could have it all and emerge nothing less than a heroine, unscathed and triumphant. I should have been more humble.

Wee Care, the group of preschools and early intervention centres that I founded and still operate in Singapore, has been a tiny, bopping boat in the midst of a never-ending storm. In 2008, the same year I commenced the EdD course, the company owned four centres across two countries. Now, there are only two schools, the natural outcome of scarce land, high rents, limited trained manpower, an over-reactive educational authority plus a growing, gnawing awareness of my own physical and emotional constraints as an older woman.

The People's Action Party has since won two general elections in Singapore, one in 2011 and the other in August this year. "Now that is far from a change!" you might argue, but the point here is that I am the one who has changed. My views of politics and governance, the pervasive role that power plays in shaping educational structures and processes - and not always for the better - has undergone a deep re-thinking and re-shifting.

A Short History

I cannot really pinpoint when the ideological floor began to shake but it must have started with *Foundations of Professionalism in Education*. It was difficult sitting through the lectures/tutorials and wondering what had happened in the space between school-then and school-now. Had I missed that much? There was a large chasm between the definite positivist structures that I could feel and rest against, and the indefinite notions of what I was listening to for the first time: the postmodern? To be honest, I cannot re-read the essay that I turned in without cringing. But the struggle had already begun. I was attracted to the uncertainty of postmodern thought but had no idea what might happen if we were all forced to think and function like aerial skydivers without any solid ground to land on.

This feeling of insecurity was heightened in the module *International Education* because the last essay compelled us to examine the large macro-notion of globalization vis-à-vis states in transition. I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of comparative research that the tutor wanted us to read and condense daily. Looking back however, I understand now what he was seeking to do. If only I had known then what I know now! I would have written a better essay, one that incorporated a fuller account of the effects of neoliberalism in shaping the competition across nations.

The essay should have problematized the meaning of the term “difference” too. We often assume that the developing world (and other oppressed individuals or groups) want or have to be like us, or that development (or progress) must take a specific form or trajectory to be perceived as successful.

It was Edward Said's (1978) conception of the Oriental Other that made me question this assumption. For me, the concept of Orientalism was a powerful introduction to post-colonial thought, as was Amita Gupta's book (2006), *Early Childhood Education, Postcolonial Theory and Teaching Practices in India*.

It was the last module on epistemology and ontology however, that helped me make that final leap into understanding and applying critical theories to educational issues. This is not to say that I had an epiphany. The moral basis for the value judgments made in matters of social justice is similar to the Judeo-Christian ethic that I was already familiar with. The module though, gave me the confidence to re-evaluate what counts as knowledge and develop the sort of thinking required to evaluate truth-claims more effectively. It gave me, in other words, a different frame with which to express myself. Now for instance, I can better analyse a policy text from the educational authority for what it is, and is not. I can contest the taken-for-granted assumptions that have contributed to policy initiatives with less of the anger and frustration welling within me, feelings that might have made me cry or withdraw from engagement with the concerns in the past.

Importantly, this ability to communicate notions of social justice beyond mere emotion, assertion or personal opinion has been – in my view – the most valuable outcome of my learning from this EdD course. It fulfills the primary motivation that I had for embarking on the programme in 2008. I wanted then, and still do now, to contribute wisely and ethically to the betterment of young lives in Singapore and the nations beyond. Knowing why and how something is knowable (where I am thinking about my thinking and the thought-perspectives

of others as well) is a meta-cognitive skill that I will always be grateful to have been taught… and learnt. It is not complete but an ongoing process, I recognise, yet I want to continue with the thinking drills to master this capacity, both as a scholar and as a professional long after this programme has come to an end.

Rewriting Professional Practice

Crafting research that is coherent and reaching conclusions with a reasonable degree of legitimacy and reliability are elements of good scholarship. I hope that the accompanying dissertation has succeeded in meeting these aims. Notwithstanding, I want people to say that I have become a better professional and fellow human being too.

I started teaching young children and young children with special needs with the aim of `helping' them. I was `helping' them to sit, pay attention and speak, to read, write and to play! It was the only kind of `helping' that I knew as a 20-something to do. During those years in the 1990s, the inequalities in educational provisions for young children and special needs' children in Singapore were not interrogated in the same way that they might be questioned now. Even so, much still needs to be done to redress entrenched and unfair educational practices in this nation.

I raise this point about `helping' for two reasons though, the first of which is to explain how this course has opened my eyes to seeing how `helping' as an action and an attitude can be problematic too. I have learnt to handle the assumptions behind `helping' with more care and sensitivity, primarily because the action presumes someone who is helping *and* someone who is being

helped. Whilst the roles (and accompanying statuses) that society imposes on the helper and the helped may never truly change, this recognition of potential dominance on my part and vice-versa, a reduced autonomy on the part of the child, requires a more deliberate effort at servant-hood, not pride for having `helped' or control over those who are being assisted. In large meetings, small group discussions and staff mentoring sessions, in decisions about lesson-plans and ways of responding to parents, I have caught myself spending more time thinking and talking about dignity, respect, choice, agency and equality than ever before. I have been sensitized to thinking about (and acting upon) power imbalances for everyone at the table as well as the little ones in the classroom next door.

`Helping' is a recurrent motif in my reflections for another reason, one that explains the tensions that I have experienced over two decades of professional practice as a teacher and preschool director. Truly, I would not have understood these tensions if not for this course. In 1996, when I started Wee Care, my primary aim was to provide children including infants and toddlers with a more play-based, experiential way of learning. I had just finished my Master's degree in Education with Sheffield, and was excited to put what I had learnt into practice. I had also been through a few years working at a public special school and two private language schools, experiences that had been disappointing and discouraging. Surely, I reasoned, there must be a way to provide services with higher pedagogical and operational standards, and more *care*. A private company run on principles of self-sufficiency seemed the best option. Whatever the constraints on my perspective at the time, I was bright-eyed and bushy-tailed with idealism.

I found out, only too soon, that the neoliberal marketplace is a difficult setting – one that can be cruel and merciless - in which to try and achieve anything of empathy or compassion. To pay the rent and teachers' salaries, I found myself compromising on pedagogical values that I held dear. Parents wanted more structured lessons and less play. They wanted results, not more information about learning processes. At every parent-teacher conference, I was asked how prepared the child would be for primary school. I found myself constantly having to justify curricula decisions and methods. Every student withdrawal was like a knife in my heart. Wee Care struggled financially for almost 10 years before it finally made a profit and even then, I have concluded that I would receive a more reliable salary working at the fast-food restaurant down the road.

The biggest regret that I have with Wee Care, though, is the fact that the school-fees are well beyond the economic means of many Singaporean families to pay. Like it or not, my decision to enter the sector as a private player twenty years ago set a whole series of other factors into play, factors that have forced me to focus on the bottom-line, marketing and client satisfaction, rather than `helping' children and their families. I cannot say that I have failed to `help' but the `help' has been limited to a certain social class and taken the shape of highly routinized, institutionalized and comprehensible forms: "Fees must still be paid, but we can let you do so in three installments, ma'am."

This dissertation then, marks my coming out as a critical social theorist and concomitant advocate for social justice, not just at the academic level but in my professional role too – whatever the tensions and puzzled looks – as a

teacher and preschool director. It is my emerging voice speaking out against public policies that many citizens and technocrats construe as being right for Singapore, only because alternatives have not been imagined, where possibilities are shot down long before they are even properly examined.

With the knowledge that I have learnt through this course, I have been able to question – through letters, petitions and blog-posts – serious concerns about the impact of over-regulation on private schools as well as the limits on social spending in Singapore. Many of these new laws and policies are being used to solve problems on the ground whilst distracting citizens from the responsibility that the government must take up in providing for its citizens, including young children. In the private operator (POP) and anchor operator (AOP) schemes for instance, private operators must agree to fee-caps in exchange for benefits like rent subsidies. This has led to bigger class sizes (because costs like salaries and materials are still high) and a reduced capacity to effect change (because these private operators are now in an uncomfortable alliance with the government). Simultaneously, these schemes have reduced the pressure on the government to bear the full costs for preschool and early intervention programmes as a public right.

One thing is clear: For the children in my classrooms, and in classrooms around the country, critical theory has made it possible for me to see the urgency in giving them a voice in all of the many matters, both small and large, that concern them. This thesis on academic acceleration in the preschool years is my attempt at giving them a say about an extracurricular practice that is now unequivocally regarded as an essential part of schooling and family life in

Singapore. The study is not perfect and there are, most certainly, gaps; yet I believe the findings must be shared and talked about. Public policies must change (or be created) to redress the inequalities that stratify the lives of young children in this nation.

Conclusion

Will anything come out of a dissertation, letters, petitions and blog-posts? I am not sure. But I do know that a voice in the wilderness is better than silence. What will I do with Wee Care at the end of this programme? It has always been an act of social entrepreneurship at heart, an explanatory category that did not exist in Singapore in the 1990s. Well, perhaps it is a microcosm of what social spending on early childhood education should look like. The financial deficits should, in other words, be expected. Would I have had the courage or know-how to speak like this eight years ago? I doubt it. So, to conclude, I just wish to state – again - how grateful I am for the opportunity that I was given to learn so much through this course.

"If I have seen further, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants"
– Sir Isaac Newton, 1675.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In Singapore, the Compulsory Education Act mandates that children above the age of 6 years and not yet 15 years must attend a national primary school to receive 6 years of primary schooling (Compulsory Education Act, Chapter 51, 2003). Prior to the age of 6 years, Singaporean children are free to attend any of a broad range of preschool options including local kindergartens and childcare centres. Kindergartens are registered with the Ministry of Education (or MOE) while the Ministry of Social and Family Development (or MSF) licenses childcare centres. The Association of Early Childhood and Training Services (or ASSETS in short), a not-for-profit organization run by and for preschool and teacher-training operators, has estimated that the early years industry in Singapore yields a revenue base of S$583 million a year. It consists of approximately 1500 kindergartens and childcare centres and employs about 16,000 people. Of the total number of kindergartens and childcare centres:

a) 50% are owned and/or operated by small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs);
b) 8% are foreign-owned;
c) 11% are linked to religious, ethnic or non-governmental organizations; and

d) 31% are owned and/or operated by the People's Community Foundation (the charitable arm of the People's Action Party, the ruling political party of Singapore) and the National Trades Union Congress (a national confederation of trade unions in the industrial, service and public sectors in Singapore)

(Association of Early Childhood and Training Services, 2013).

In 2010, it was reported that 98.8% of all six-year-old Singaporean children attend preschool, one of the highest participation rates in the world. Of the approximately 500 children who did not, some were residing overseas, enrolled in special education schools or were being home-schooled (Ministry of Education, 2010). For many Singaporean parents however, preschool is often only one of the many learning or enrichment activities that their young children participate in. There is an extensive "shadow" system (Bray, 1999, p.17) of commercial enrichment schools and tuition centres that provide supplementary classes to young children as well as children in formal schooling. In a *Business Times* report, Leong (2010) reported that the tuition industry in Singapore in 2008 was worth S$820 million.

For the purpose of this dissertation, I will regard this "shadow" system as a network of schools, centres, programmes, activities and lessons outside of the young child's main preschool provision. In other words, it will include classes with a more creative intent such as art, music, dance or drama, as well as classes geared toward the specific acceleration or enhancement of a child's academic skills, such as literacy (e.g. phonics), numeracy (e.g. mental mathematics or the abacus) or a second language. Additionally, there are many cases of children receiving tuition at home or other special programmes for

`right-brain stimulation', `thinking skills', `memory enhancement' and the like. These lessons are often conducted on weekends or in the afternoons or evenings on weekdays. In 2015, a *Straits Times* survey of 500 parents revealed that 70% of all school children in Singapore receive private tuition (Davie, 2015).

Rationale for the Study

In 2012, I completed my Institution-Focused Study that explored the reasons why Singaporean parents enroll their preschool children in these extra-curricular activities. In that study, I sought to use discursive positioning as an analytic method to make sense of parental decisions about enrichment lessons in the early childhood years. Both then and now, there is a social and discursive nuance that must be highlighted when Singaporean parents talk about enrichment activities for their young children. I share this shade of meaning as a local parent myself. To many Singaporean parents, the terms "enrichment", "extra-curricular", "supplementary" and "preparation" for primary school (and with this, "academic preparedness" or "readiness" for the national system of education) are linked and almost interchangeable. Singaporean parents tend to `lump' any form of activity outside of preschool as "enrichment" and within the same broad and functional category of usefulness: that is, of enhancing the child's repertoire of skills and abilities, regardless of whether the enhancement is specifically, `cognitive', `social' or `emotional'.

My IFS and an earlier pilot study (undertaken for a compulsory module on epistemology) revealed that Singaporean mothers spoke of themselves as

being reasonable and balanced parents. They valued the role of play and creative learning in their children's lives. They wanted their children to acquire social skills and to have time for leisure activities too. Ironically however, the mothers simultaneously indicated that these advantages could be secured by participating in enrichment programmes. In other words, by referencing enrichment with learning, acceleration, play, creativity, social skills and leisurely pursuits, the mothers maintained that they did not have developmentally inappropriate intentions. Rather, enrichment (and in the same vein, acceleration) was positioned as being a beneficial activity. In fact, Acceleration-as-Beneficial-Activity was a key interpretative repertoire; the children were positioned as needing acceleration for all of its direct and indirect benefits. Additionally, Acceleration-as-Preparing-for-Primary-1 was a central and far more encompassing interpretative repertoire in all of the interviews. The mothers had made the decision to `enrich' and accelerate their children to facilitate their transition across the preschool - primary school divide.

Whilst satisfying and illuminating, the IFS and pilot project were marked by two main limitations; first, both studies interviewed mothers from a high income bracket as they were parents whom I had approached from my own network of personal and professional contacts. Secondly, I had become increasingly concerned towards the end of the project to hear what children themselves have to say about enrichment and acceleration activities.

In addition to these concerns, my epistemological "lens" had undergone a progressive but significant shift by the end of the IFS. This was probably because the IFS had identified meritocracy (a key ideology in the Singapore education system) as one of the main reasons for parents engaging in

accelerative efforts on behalf of their children. In Singapore, high-stakes examinations are conducted at regular intervals to determine future schooling options for students. Children are assigned to different streams of schooling based on examination results, with some schools (and academic bands) being considered “elite” and others not. The mothers in both of my earlier studies had made acceleration out to be a rational and precautionary strategy to maintain their respective children’s lead(s) in school. In view of the intense competition, especially at the Primary School Leaving Examination (or PSLE) at the age of 12 years, acceleration was seen as a sheer necessity in the early childhood years.

This revelation led me to problematize and ask many questions regarding meritocracy (and its effects) in Singapore; in particular, the invariable competition for academic rank, status and prestige in schools (including preschools), and its subsequent effect on the creation and maintenance of socioeconomic class divisions (and all that this eventually produces in power relationships) amongst people-groups in Singapore. At the same time, I had begun to realize that many educational policies in Singapore encourage the commodification and marketization of preschool provisions (including enrichment programmes) for young children. I subsequently felt led to investigate if the government’s laissez-faire attitude towards free enterprise in early schooling was also reinforcing and reproducing the power of elite (wealthy) groups over less powerful ones inadvertently.

The Historical & Political Context of Academic Acceleration in Singapore

A brief history of education policy in Singapore, especially as it relates to the nation's economic goals, the Compulsory Education Act and the inevitable tensions (and problems) that result from having preschool provisions under the purview of the free market may be found in Appendix 1 of this thesis. On the fringes of this tension between public or private preschool entitlement in Singapore and in the long period between the nation's founding and the present, an extensive industry of enrichment and tutorial centres/programmes has sprouted.

Like Leong (2010), Wong (2012) cites figures from the Department of Statistics to show that Singaporean households spend approximately S$820 million a year on both centre and home-based private tuition. In addition, the figures indicate that the number of tuition centres has increased five times over the past decade. There are now more than 500 centres in Singapore (not including those that label themselves as enrichment or creative learning centres or teachers who operate as freelancers outside of a commercial entity). In contrast, there are fewer than 400 primary and secondary schools in total. Toh (2008) writes that Singapore is called a "tuition nation" and that "more parents are signing up their kindergarten and nursery-level children". Anecdotal reports by parents make the claim that occasionally, children are enrolled in multiple tuition centres and their monthly tuition fees can be as high as S$3000 a month (approximately GBP1500).

Up to 21 December 2009 when a new Private Education Act was enacted, most tuition and enrichment centres in Singapore were largely unregulated by

the government. Now, private centres that seek to provide supplementary education services are required to register with the Council for Private Education (CPE). Unfortunately, the definition of what constitutes "private education" can be somewhat nebulous in Singapore. On its website, the Ministry of Education describes the following:

a) Private education institutions (or PEIs) that offer education leading to the award of a diploma or degree, or full-time post-secondary education leading to the award of a certificate;
b) PEIs that offer full-time preparatory courses for entrance / placement tests for joining Ministry of Education (MOE) mainstream schools, or for external examinations;
c) Foreign System Schools (FSS) offering full-time primary or secondary education wholly or substantially in accordance with a foreign or international curriculum;
d) Privately-funded special education schools.

Businesses that provide enrichment and even academic tutoring for preschoolers do not fall into any of these categories, so whilst the Ministry's website page makes a passing mention of the inclusion of "continuing/supplementary education classes in commercial/business studies, computers, languages, fine arts, tuition, etc." (Ministry of Education, 2014), it is not difficult for an enrichment centre for preschoolers to circumvent the registration route and operate in Singapore with the barest prerequisites (usually, the formalization of a business entity that then enters into a lease agreement for commercial space before commencing to deliver lessons).

In a parliamentary reply in September 2012 about the monitoring of tuition centres and agencies in Singapore, then Minister for Education, Heng Swee Keat, responded by saying that sending students who are already coping well in schools for extra tuition can "create unnecessary stress and detract them from holistic development" (Ministry of Education, 2012). However, he continued, "If parents should decide to engage tuition services, they will have to exercise their discretion and carry out basic checks, for example, by speaking to the tutors concerned and checking their credentials." He added further that the Ministry would not regulate tuition agencies nor create an industry body that would maintain a database of approved tutors. The speech was noticeably reticient about the commercial (and highly lucrative) aspects of tuition in Singapore, and made no reference to its relevance or appropriateness in the early childhood years.

My Personal & Professional Context and Academic Acceleration

A brief account of why and how neoliberal tenets have been upheld by the Singapore government in its management of the preschool sector may be found in Appendix 2. In Singapore, the free market reigns and even government schools at other levels have been expected to play by neoliberal rules. Tan (2008) recounts former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong as saying that competition within and between the nation's schools improves the quality of education, provides parents and students with a wider range of choices and improves accountability by forcing schools to improve their programmes (Goh, 1992).

International advocates for early childhood education however, agree that quality preschool education is invariably publicly or government-funded rather than left to the private sector (Ang, 2012, p.44). In fact, publicly funded and free preschool entitlement is not a new phenomenon or impossible to achieve. It is available in many European countries such as Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Norway, Sweden and the UK. In England, all 3 to 4-year-olds and some 2-year-olds are eligible for 570 hours of free early education or childcare per year. Sweden provides two years of free preschool at least, sometimes to children as young as 1 and including children with special needs.

The neoliberal context in Singapore however, is the context in which I have operated as an early years teacher, as well as founder and director of my own private preschool. Twenty years ago, `going private' was in my mind, the only effective means by which to express important pedagogical ideals about learning through play. As a Singaporean, it was not an unnatural thing to do either. The government supported private enterprise and it was a measure of one's abilities to become successful in running one's own business.

This insider element of my research will be more fully discussed in the chapter on methodology. For the moment, I wish to highlight that my research questions emerged from the daily dilemmas of running the preschool. These have included the high cost of rent and salaries as well as high staff turnover. It has also included the large gap, especially in the early days, between client-expectations and my preferred pedagogical position(s). Indeed, I have experienced the problems between education-as-a-social service and education-for-profit as *realities*, the pressures between what-customers-want and how-I-wish-to-teach as a double-edged sword. Most of all, when parents

have asked for extra homework and/or additional classes to supplement their children's regular schooling (and especially when they have withdrawn from the classes in my centre to search for more `academic' or `local' lessons elsewhere), the question that has always swirled repeatedly in my head has been *why*.

Ball (2006) writes that to review and describe the use of the market form in English education, one needs to address the following: competition, supply and demand, producer and consumer behaviour, privatization and commodification, values and ethics and distributional outcomes (p.116). Using Ball's criteria, I suggest that in Singapore, early childhood education and its corresponding shadow, enrichment or tuition classes for preschoolers, are highly competitive arenas of practice. They compete within their own fields, but supplementary activities may affect the mainstream too (Bray, 2009); for instance, when it sends signals of what preschool children can potentially learn (e.g. chess, musical instruments, martial arts, etc.). Parents may then begin to expect the same kinds of activities in regular preschool.

Local parents seem to communicate by their actions and choices that what local preschools have to offer – in terms of academic preparation - is not sufficient. Their demand for extracurricular activities may be described as extensive. They have been known to seek out the best tutors and enrichment programmes to give their children a head start in life, even before the onset of primary education. This commodification of extra-curricular education has obvious ethical implications, especially where it widens the achievement gap between low-income and high-income families in the quest to stay ahead.

From the perspective of the government however, leaving the enrichment and tuition industry to regulate itself according to the principles of the free-market is probably advantageous. In line with neoliberal principles, tutoring is most likely seen as a form of industry and industry contributes to the economic pie (Singapore Economic Development Board, 2016). At the same time, academic acceleration can enhance the skills-sets of its people, Singapore's "most precious resource" (Ministry of Education, 2016). It is not inconsistent with a meritocratic ethos either, another ideological position that the PAP government has pushed for decades in Singapore with controversial outcomes (Low, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

The research in this thesis aims at examining the practice of academic acceleration in the preschool years in Singapore using a critical "social justice" perspective (Tan, 2006, p.36). This is because it wishes to uncover whether the sociocultural and educational practice of academic acceleration contributes to power inequities between groups and/or individuals in Singapore, especially where such conditions are created or sustained by those in power to control those who lack power (Ornstein & Levine, 2003). In the Singapore context, many government speeches and policy initiatives reveal that early childhood care and education continues to serve the ultimate master of a competitive and meritocratic system (A/Prof S. Lim, personal communication, November 14, 2011). It is highly plausible that its shadow fulfills the same function. There is

widespread consensus that meritocracy has led to elitism and inequalities across social groups in the country.

At the same time, there are additional facets to the problem. There is evidence that income inequality in Singapore has increased in the past decade whilst social mobility has declined (Low & Yeoh, 2014). Private tuition, or rather the ability or inability of specific families to harness additional support outside of school, has been implicated as one of the causes of social immobility. Politicians, journalists and the man on the street talk about the "unnecessary" intensity of tuition on television and social media blogs as well as in newspaper interviews and coffee-shop conversations between family and friends (e.g. Wong, Ng & Ong, 2013). In September 2013, a Nominated Member of Parliament, Janice Koh, asked a question of the Minister of Education, Heng Swee Keat, whether "shadow education" was preventing some children from accessing equal opportunities (Ministry of Education, 2013). A month later, a journalist from *The Straits Times* interviewed Professor Mark Bray from the University of Hong Kong who said that Singapore was very much like Hong Kong. Poorer families may "find themselves being forced to buy tutoring in order to remain in the race to do well in school" (Bray, reported by Nirmala, 2013).

I set out to unpack these notions in greater depth; especially where it relates to the subjectivities of a wider spectrum of local Singaporean parents about tuition and enrichment classes in the years before formal schooling. To this end, my aim was to understand, not simply why parents engaged in accelerative practices, but how they made sense of these practices in the light of their socioeconomic circumstances and projected aspirations for their

children. I was keen to determine if socioeconomic differences played out in the field of tuition and enrichment schools; and if yes, how so.

Nestled in a political economy that largely, if not completely (Liow, 2011), expounds the virtues of the free and efficient workings of the market, my concern additionally was to uncover the effects of non-state intervention (Ball, 1990, 1998) in the tuition and enrichment industry in Singapore. Specifically, by focusing on the microcosm of tuition and educational enrichment classes in Singapore, I set out to examine if a neoliberal political rationality has contributed to an early childhood "marketplace" and if yes, to describe the effects of these policies on the lives of families, young children and their teachers.

Indeed, for local kindergarten teachers, the omniscient reality of academic acceleration in the lives of our young students is a difficult one to handle and come to terms with. In this present study, my concern was to uncover why kindergarten teachers in Singapore seem to lack a necessary "voice" about their ways of knowing (Llorens, 1994, p.7). Goodson (1992) has suggested that those with power to define the educational system (i.e. politicians, bureaucrats and administrators) are reluctant to relinquish their control to mere teachers. Their silencing is hence, inevitable.

Finally, and as concluded during the IFS, I think it is important to know what Singaporean children themselves make of the reasons for enrichment / tuition classes. Few studies have sought to document children's voices about learning in the Singapore context. In one research project, Dr Christine Chen (2013), President of the Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore), had 43 children aged 5 and 6 years old draw what they would like to do if they could do anything that they wanted to on a "special day". 70% of the drawings

reflected playful times with the child's own family, 20% the child playing with friends, and the final 10%, the child playing alone. There were no references to enrichment or tuition classes in any of the drawings although participants in focus group discussions afterwards listed enrichment classes as one of the features of a Singaporean childhood.

I am interested to know if the views of Singaporean children about academic acceleration are silenced too. Or does the silence mean something else? There is a need to listen further – and by this, deeply and metaphorically – not only because children are "the subject of rights, entitled to be involved in decisions and actions that affect them" (Lansdown, 2004, p.4) but also because their socio-emotional wellbeing may result in higher academic achievement, a lower incidence of problem behaviours, better peer relationships and a more positive classroom and school climate (Elias, 2006).

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

In this section, I will review the literature on meritocracy in Singapore as well as related notions of pragmatism, neoliberalism and economic development, especially where these may have played a part in shaping Singaporeans' conceptions about life-goals, choices and views about education/training. Next, I will consider the socio-cultural roots to parenting behaviours; in particular, the Bourdieusian notion that middle-class parents are likely to work towards reproducing a certain "habitus" so that social and economic privileges are accrued and passed on to their offspring. With this, I will consider developmentally appropriate practices, parental ethnotheories and Bernstein's conceptions of elaborated and restricted codes in children's language systems. Third, I will review the literature on the "shadow" education system in other East Asian economies including Singapore; and last, I will conclude with a summary about Foucault and his ideas about "governmentality" and "voice", especially where these are pertinent to notions of power and powerlessness in citizens, young children and here too, their teachers. These overarching concepts will frame my analyses and discussion in the rest of this dissertation.

Meritocracy in Singapore.

The term “meritocracy” was coined by Michael Young in his 1958 book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. In 2001, Young wrote to *The Guardian* to say that he had been sadly disappointed: although the book had been written as a satire and a warning, it had not been heeded. He continued,

> “It is good sense to appoint individual people to jobs on their merit. It is the opposite when those who are judged to have merit of a particular kind harden into a new social class without room in it for others…
>
> A social revolution has been accomplished by harnessing schools and universities to the task of sieving people according to education's narrow band of values.
>
> With an amazing battery of certificates and degrees at its disposal, education has put its seal of approval on a minority, and its seal of disapproval on the many who fail to shine from the time they are relegated to the bottom streams at the age of seven or before.
>
> The new class has the means at hand, and largely under its control, by which it reproduces itself.”

In Singapore, meritocracy is often defined as “a practice that rewards individual merit with social rank, job positions, higher incomes or general recognition and prestige” (Tan, 2008, p.8). Merit, in turn, is conceived as a combination of effort and talent, both inherent and cultivated. Significantly, meritocracy is widely regarded as a “core principle of governance… as close as anything gets to being a national ideology” (Low, 2014, p.48).

Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s first Prime Minister, described his belief in the importance of meritocracy as follows:

> “My fundamental belief is that whatever your background, you should have an equal chance in life, in education, in health, in nutrition. So you may not be as well-fed with all the meat and vitamins as a wealthier person, but you should have enough to make sure that you’re not stunted, so you can perform and achieve your best in life. That’s the only way a society can grow...” (Lee, 2011, p.50-51).

Lee's views about meritocracy have shaped the manner in which Singapore ascribes and rewards talent, especially through the national education system. In the late 1970s and in the name of efficiency, education in Singapore was revamped to reduce "educational wastage". Pupils started being streamed in both primary and secondary school to allow them "to progress at a pace more suited to their abilities" (Goh & Gopinathan, 2008, p.23). Better students were (and still are) channelled into "elite" schools; the students at the lower end of the continuum into vocational training. By the 1980s, there was (and still is) regular tracking and student assessment by the Ministry of Education's Research and Testing Division. A gifted education programme was implemented in 1985. The prospective Public Service Commission (PSC) scholar is "one of the most carefully scrutinised 18-year-olds in the world." By the time he/she appears before the PSC panel that awards the annual public service scholarships, "a thick dossier on him would have been compiled" (Han, Ibrahim, Chua, Lim, Low, Lin & Chan, 2011, pp.132-133).

In 1997, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong introduced a new catch-phrase to encapsulate the nation's vision for education. The vision was termed "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" (TSLN) and its aim was to "prepare children for the future and to prepare them to be continually prepared for the future" (Ng, 2008, p.2). It was crafted as a response to globalization and increasing economic competition. It generated initiatives such as the Ability-Driven Education paradigm (or ADE):

> "the belief that success is achievable by anyone who has the talent and willingness to work hard. In other words, an ADE supports the principle of meritocracy where social mobility is through one's effort, regardless of one's social, political, economic and cultural background"
>
> (Tan, 2008, p.7).

In recent times, Low (2014) has observed that Singaporeans now perceive the meritocratic system as being less fair, primarily because of rising inequality and "concerns over declining social mobility" (p.3). Many Singaporeans view meritocracy as a "thinly-veiled justification for elitism, and the reason for the state's indifference towards inequality and redistribution" (p.4).

Significantly, in my IFS study and initial pilot project, all of the mothers whom I interviewed highlighted educational meritocracy and its resultant effects (e.g. competition for places in good and future schools) as *the* main, salient factor in acceleration decisions. I reached the conclusion that meritocracy creates tensions for the parents and teachers who want to raise and teach their young children in a developmentally appropriate manner. Indeed, it was disturbing for me to learn that some children in primary school had already completed the "O" level syllabus in a Japanese cram school (Chua, IFS, 2012, Extract 36, lines 814 to 817).

Proponents of meritocracy in Singapore however, insist that there are good reasons to keep meritocracy as a principle, intact (Tan, 2001). This is because businesses need people with the appropriate skills, expertise and personalities to stay competitive. Rewards based on merit, in Tan's view, satisfy both "equity and efficiency criteria" (p.276). The problem, in other words, is not with meritocracy per se but with the system that it engenders (especially of early identification and selection). This system, Tan asserts, can be modified.

Pragmatism in Singapore.

Interestingly, Tan's views about meritocracy are consistent with the dominant narrative expounded by the Singapore government. They resonate with a tone of pragmatism and are linked to assumptions about the need for Singapore to remain competitive, fair and efficient. Chua (1985) has traced the roots of this pragmatism to the stance held by the People's Action Party when it formed the first independent government of Singapore in 1965. He describes the origin as being "at once historical, material and conceptual" (p.30).

Specifically, the historical and material situation in Singapore at the time revolved around domestic economics. Singapore was a non-industrial, entrepot and commercial centre of the British Empire then, with very high rates of unemployment/underemployment and a rapidly growing population. The immediate goal was to develop the economy through rapid industrialization.

Since then, the PAP has reiterated the view that everyone in the country has very little choice but to do what is necessary to help Singapore survive. The elements that contribute to a discourse of survival, of keeping the nation alive, form a "conceptual framework for the day-to-day operations of the PAP" that is presented as being "natural", "necessary" and "realistic" (Chua, 1985, p.30). It is this `needless-to-say' component of the rhetoric that is pragmatic. Economic progress results in social and political stability that benefits everyone, even to the extent of building a democratic society.

Chua further argues that this rhetoric has become ideological, a system that has infiltrated the political consciousness of the population and become a way in which Singaporeans think about their lives (Chua, 1983, 1985). As long

as it works to secure economic development, Chua (1985) argues, many government policies pertaining to social and even private life are subject to this pragmatism. He illustrates this argument with examples from industrial relations, population policies, political decisions about language use, the management of crime and educational streaming in Singapore. Indeed, the fact that the government has not taken the step to publicly fund early childhood education (as detailed in Appendix 1) may be seen as another example of pragmatic reasoning.

In an interview with the *International Herald Tribune* in 2007, Lee Kuan Yew was quoted as saying,

> "We are pragmatists. We don't stick to any ideology. Does it work? Let's try it and if it does work, fine, let's continue it. If it doesn't work, toss it out, try another one. We are not enamoured with any ideology. Let the historians and the PhD students work out their doctrines. I'm not interested in theories per se" (Apcar, Arnold & Mydans, 2007).

Years earlier in 1982, his second Deputy Prime Minister (Foreign Affairs), Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, had also stated,

> "But when all is said and done, the pragmatic and unsentimental approach has done more to make life better for Singaporeans than what proponents of state welfare have been able to achieve for their people… unsentimental pragmatism has made life more human, more dignified and more hopeful for Singaporeans" (Rajaratnam, 1982).

Indeed, pragmatism is an essential feature in the worldviews of many Singaporeans. In February 2015, a debate at the *Singapore Perspectives* forum had a Singaporean businessman assert that it is only through being pragmatic that idealism can come to fruition (bin Khidzer, 2015). At this same debate, Professor Kishore Mahbubani from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy pointed out that pragmatism is the opposite of ideology because it is not

enslaved to a single principle but adapts and adopts ideas or methods whenever it is expedient for the country to do so.

It is partially and probably this deep-seated pragmatism that inures Singaporeans to working hard and focusing on economic outcomes when evaluating the quality of their lives. In a study entitled *The Government in our Lives*, Yap (2012) describes how the responses of middle-class participants from a series of qualitative interviews that he undertook echoed the hegemonic ideologies of the government. For instance, his respondents spoke of Singapore's economic success as being impermanent and the future uncertain. They strongly espoused the ideals of meritocracy, hard work and individual effort. One said, "We have to improve ourselves…. Have to upgrade ourselves to stay competitive" (p.13).

Yap also found that his respondents placed more importance on activities that were economically productive than cultural activities and development. This was similar to results from an earlier study by Chua (2002) that Singaporeans tended to perceive certain disciplines of study to be "better" and "more practical" (i.e. business and medicine vs. fine arts and the humanities). In fact, Chua found an observable trend that he termed "the certification of the self" (p.112). Here, individuals measured their self-worth through the attainment of educational qualifications and certificates. Highly educated individuals saw themselves and others as better individuals than those with lesser or fewer qualifications.

In Yap's study, the respondents who were also parents of school-going children imposed this "certification of the self" upon their children (p.19). These parents transferred their aspirations of higher education, and thus upward

mobility and a comfortable life, by demonstrating a concern for the social and economic mobility of their children and by emphasizing the importance of education in relation to the future. There was, in other words, a clear, pragmatic and instrumental rationality: Education was a means towards social and economic mobility and hence, monetary wealth (p.22).

Neoliberalism in Singapore

Interestingly, in Singapore, meritocratic beliefs and a pragmatic style of reasoning appear to form something of a triumvirate with neoliberal ideals in shaping the lives and mindsets of ordinary Singaporeans. George (2000) for instance, has observed that the common purpose in Singapore is the "Darwinian struggle for national economic competitiveness" (p.19). This is hinged, quite specifically, to Singapore's pride of place as an international financial centre of considerable credibility and repute (Lee, 2000). Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has equated the nation's financial success with the need to administer "bitter medicine" and "tough policies" when necessary to "overcome economic challenges" (1995). In fact, Singaporeans understand that in order to secure material comforts, the country needs good government and policies that "level up", not equalize outcomes (George, 2000, p.17).

The neoliberal paradigm that permeates through Singapore's daily functioning as an Asian economic powerhouse has been described by Moss (2014) as a "story", a true and totalizing "meta-narrative" that has gained increasing dominance. In this story, the world is

> "… built on relationships of competition, contract and calculation; inhabited by a breed of autonomous, flexible and utility-maximising individuals; and actualized through markets, individual choice and technical practice" (p.17).

More frighteningly perhaps, the story of neoliberalism has spawned further sub-narratives, including one that revolves around Human Capital Theory (or HCT). In HCT, the goal is to improve positive educational and economic outcomes through the cultivation of `human capital'. In turn, HCT breeds a belief that early investments in education are important, if not critical. An "assemblage of technologies" typically ensues, including notions such as child development concepts, knowledge and vocabularies; developmental and learning goals; the authority of various expert groups and particular social constructions or images of the child (or the parent or educator).

Moss (2014) cites Penn (2010) in highlighting that under neoliberalism, HCT ignores social and economic inequalities or takes these for granted. It does not consider redistribution as part of the range of possible solutions or redress to even out socioeconomic disparities in societies. Rather, it assumes that teaching children to compete or succeed will automatically lead to poverty reduction.

In addition, there are further consequences. Ball (2008) for example, writes that neoliberalism spawns a `knowledge economy', a concept that is derived from the idea that knowledge and education can be treated as business products. In this frame of thinking, knowledge workers – unlike manual workers – work with their heads and produce or express ideas, knowledge and information. This highly skilled and flexible workforce is "needed to compete effectively in today's dynamic global markets" (p.24). In other words, the ability to produce and use knowledge has become "a major factor in economic

development and critical to a nation's competitive advantage" (p.25). When this happens, knowledge is commodified and a form of "academic capitalism" sets in (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

Ball (2008) also argues that because of the supposed pressures of international economic competition, education policies are subordinated to economic `necessities' where in fact, "there are profits to be made from the privatization of education…" (p.45). When this happens, not only does the public sector begin to take on forms and practices characteristic of an "entrepreneurial government" (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992), the ensuing market form in the education `industry' gives rise to features such as, "the removal or weakening of bureaucratic controls" or "support for and encouragement of choice". In private schools, a culture of self-interest can develop that manifests itself in "survivalism" – an orientation away from social or educational concerns, including mixed-ability groups or students with special needs (p.53).

It is this "survivalism" (aye, pragmatism) that can explain the Singaporean focus on academic acceleration. More specifically, the "survivalism" given traction by Human Capital Theory can give rise to the unquestioned belief that studying hard to become a knowledge worker is the right thing to do, not just for one's self but one's country as well. Sold or purchased as educational products/services, acceleration programmes may be seen as contributing to the productive cultivation of individual lives, plus uphold the nation's standing on the world's stage.

Bourdieu and social class differences in Singapore.

Interestingly, a concern for "certification" may be related to social class. A study by Khong (2000) revealed that the home-school mediation styles amongst middle-class families in Singapore fell along a binary. Parents were either "proactive" or "passive", yet they held on to similar childrearing goals. Proactive parents engaged in dynamic and competitive processes of schooling and learning. In contrast, passive parents were preoccupied with the pressures of working life and paid less attention to the child's schooling. Notwithstanding, they paid for a "tuition solution" (p.301) to ensure that their children kept up with the requirements or demands presented at school.

The efforts of middle-class Singaporean parents towards the nurture, education and acceleration of their children are not unlike the behaviours of middle-class parents in the United States. In her book, *Unequal Childhoods*, Lareau (2003) notes that middle-class parents in America focus on the "concerted cultivation" of their offspring (p.2). By this, she refers to the ways in which middle-class parents organize their children's lives and schedules around activities that enhance their talents in a concerted manner. Devine (2004) has demonstrated that middle-class parents mobilize a range of resources to secure educational and occupational success for their children.

Parenting behaviours that focus on enhancing children's achievement in school may be described as generating a certain "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1994). To Bourdieu, "habitus" is defined as an attribute of social agents - whether individuals, groups or institutions - that incorporates a "structured and structuring structure" (1994, p.170). As explained by Maton (2008, p.51), this

means that it is “structured” by one’s past and present circumstances such as family upbringing and educational experiences. It is “structuring” as it helps to shape one’s present and future practices. Moreover, it is a “structure” in that it is systematically ordered and not random. Altogether, this “structure” encompasses a system of dispositions that generate perceptions, appreciations and practices (Bourdieu, 1990, p.53). These are durable over time and transposable. They are capable of becoming active within a broad range of social contexts (Bourdieu, 1993, p.87).

Interestingly, Bourdieu (1986) states that habitus does not function alone. He gives the following equation:

[(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice

Unpacked, what this means is that how one acts or behaves (practice) is the outcome of dispositions (habitus) and one’s position in a field (capital), within the state of play that is going on at the present time in a specific social arena (field) (Maton, 2008).

To draw additional nuanced distinctions, Bourdieu differentiates between forms of “capital” too. Moore (2008) explains it like this: There is not only economic capital (or “mercantile exchange”) but also symbolic capital (that includes subtypes such as cultural capital, linguistic capital, scientific and literary capital, etc.). In Bourdieu’s conception, each individual has a portfolio of capital consisting of a specific amount and a particular composition (Crossley, 2008). Taken in sum, “symbolic capital” constitutes “assets that bring social and cultural advantage or disadvantage” (Moore, 2008, p.104). When every person’s economic and symbolic worth is mapped onto a grid as a set of coordinates (with one’s “amount of capital” falling along the x axis and “quality of

that capital" on the y axis), that graph and the individual points exemplify members' positions in a social space. With habitus, social space prepares the way for "processes of mobilization and representation" that bring "social class" into being (Crossley, 2008, p.99).

Bourdieu & Passeron (1977) show in *Reproduction* how children from culturally wealthy backgrounds inherit capital in the form of embodied dispositions that are recognized and valued by teachers and the institutional biases of educational systems (Crossley, 2008, p.95). In contrast, studies like Willis' (1977) have shown how "lads" from the working class can create a "culture of resistance" to school knowledge and authority complete with their own language, rules of behaviour and attitudes towards others (as cited by Kang, 2006, p.164). In this study, the counter-school culture of these young men eventually reproduced a subordinate class position that in turn, concluded with them in working class jobs.

Similarly, Alexander, Entwisle & Olson (2014) have shown through a 25-year longitudinal study that family circumstances early in life can cast a long shadow. Poor children find it harder to stay in school, avoid trouble and find work in a tough economy. In the long term, they are less likely to achieve upward mobility, financial stability and a fulfilling personal life (p.13). Certainly, as predicted by Bourdieu, each field of symbolic capital reproduces the system of unequal relations of class and power in the economic field and so "reproduces the fundamental structure of social inequality" (Moore, 2008, p.104).

These studies beg important questions in the Singapore context. For instance, is academic acceleration a function of social class that only middle-

class parents engage in it? Furthermore, are middle-class parents more sensitive to national ideologies like meritocracy and pragmatism that subsequently amplify notions of "concerted cultivation"? In answering these questions, we should consider beliefs about developmentally appropriate practices and parental ethno-theories too. It is to these frameworks that I will now turn.

Developmentally appropriate practices in Singapore.

Many preschool teachers in Singapore, including myself, are trained to teach according to "developmentally appropriate practices" (or DAP, for short) (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). As a framework that guides educational planning, DAP uses age-related characteristics to determine what sorts of educational experiences young children should be provided with that best promote their learning and development (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009).

In an affirmation of this model, the Singapore Ministry of Education (2013a) titles a chapter in *Nurturing Early Learners: A Curriculum for Kindergartens in Singapore* as, "Planning Appropriate Learning Experiences for Children". In this chapter, teachers are encouraged to plan learning objectives that are "appropriate" for the group of children in their classrooms, consider children's interests and abilities, as well as their prior knowledge and experiences (p.20). Learning activities should provide for the holistic development of children and allow for children to talk about their experiences, express their thoughts and opinions plus explain how problems are solved when

they occur during play. The theoretical underpinnings of the NEL Guide are drawn from the works of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and John Dewey that construct children as “curious, active and competent learners” (p.12).

Importantly, Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew & Ingram (2010) have pointed out that similar orientations toward child-oriented, play-based educational practices may be found in other countries such as “experiential education” in Belgium and the Netherlands (Laevers, 2000), the Reggio Emilia approach in northern Italy (e.g. Rinaldi, 2005), Te Whariki in New Zealand (e.g. Carr & May, 2000) and the Swedish National Curriculum (Alvestad & Samuelsson, 1999). They also cite the work of Bertram & Pascal (2002) in pointing out that many countries (including Asian ones such as Japan, Korea and Hong Kong) promote an interactional pedagogy where children and adults operate in reciprocity with one another, encourage play-based, first-hand and exploratory experiences that give children opportunities to talk and interact, adopt flexible teaching and learning strategies according to the needs of the children, and discourage the use of early disciplinary and prescriptive methods of instruction.

Interestingly, not all early childhood proponents are advocates of DAP. The framework has been criticized for being too positivist, categorical and not amenable to alternative viewpoints (Lubeck, 1998). Woodhead (1999) too has argued that standardized notions of child development insufficiently represent the experience of children in families, schools and other settings. He writes that the challenge is to reconstruct a model based on a sociocultural approach: one that links the features of childhood in diverse settings with specific economic, social and cultural processes. In this however, he admits that there are

formidable challenges. This is because cultural and epistemological relativity can become entangled with issues of moral relativity. In the case of the current topic, sociocultural demands may accelerate young children in the academic domain far beyond reasonable boundaries.

Deconstructing developmental knowledge, in other words, can undermine the scientific basis for determining what is harmful versus beneficial for children (Woodhead, 1999). Instead, Woodhead suggests that we should adhere to standards of practice that are "relative but not arbitrary" (1998, p.7). He recommends a "contextually appropriate practice" (CAP) or emergent hybrid, "Practice Appropriate to the Context of Early Development" (PACED). Amongst others, PACED would incorporate considerations such as

> "the age and individuality of children, as well as the social context of their care, the roles and responsibilities within their family and community, patterns of communication and language, approach to socialization, and so on" (p.10).

At the same time, there is a small but significant body of evidence affirming that developmentally appropriate practices can have important and positive effects on the lives of young children. Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew & Ingram (2010) for instance, cite the following studies that demonstrate:

a) that boys in developmentally appropriate classrooms may suffer considerably less stress and concomitantly, increased motivation and emotional development compared to children in more traditional classrooms (Dunn & Kontos (1997) and Van Horn, Karlin, Ramey, Aldridge & Snyder (2005));

b) that children who had received the Enriched Curriculum in Northern Ireland had stronger beliefs that they could influence their future

learning through their own efforts; they were also more motivated and more curious, plus they were prepared to accept more mental challenges and take on more difficult work (e.g. McGuinness, Sproule, Walsh & Trew, 2009b);

c) that children who had been taught according to the Tools of the Mind curriculum showed improvements in executive functions such as working memory and cognitive flexibility (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas & Munro, 2007).

Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew & Ingram (2010) also cite studies such as Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years or REPEY (e.g. Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004) and the Early Years Enriched Curriculum Evaluation Project (or EYECEP) (McGuinness, Sproule, Trew & Walsh, 2009a) to conclude that we need a more integrated pedagogy in the early years, one that focuses on the interaction between the adult and the child in the classroom, as well as one that incorporates ongoing in-service professional development for all early years practitioners.

Notwithstanding, the more pressing question that remains is how the existing literature on DAP informs our thinking about academic acceleration in the Singapore context. On the one hand, parents may be extending young children's learning far into Woodhead's (1998) fear of the "arbitrary". At the same time, sociocultural and other pressures may be preventing early childhood teachers from sharing what they know of the potentially good effects of DAP with the significant others who make decisions on behalf of young children. Moreover, these constraints may not be allowing these Singaporean teachers to develop workable local expressions of the integrated pedagogy that Walsh et al.

(2010) speak of. As a direct consequence, parents may observe a non-alignment between a preschool ethos that is largely child-centred and a formal schooling environment that emphasizes tests and examinations; and revert to academic acceleration as a remedy to secure future gains.

Parental ethnotheories and culture in Singapore.

Harkness & Super (1992) coined the term, "parental ethnotheories" and described them as beliefs that are

> "embedded in the experiences of daily life that parents have with their own children at particular ages, as well as being derived from the accumulated cultural experience of the community or reference group" (p.374).

Whilst intergenerational, these theories are also affected by experience, including the effect that the child has, in reverse, on his/her caregivers. Ultimately though, Harkness & Super (1992) argue that regardless of parental beliefs and behaviours, most children acquire the qualities that are held in high esteem in his/her culture. In other words,

> "children's competence in the culturally marked areas is accelerated, whereas development in other domains lags if indeed it is even recognized" (p.389).

Said differently, parental ethnotheories are "the nexus through which elements of the larger culture are filtered…" (Harkness, Super, Axia, Eliasz, Palacios & Welles-Nystrom, 2001, p.9). They may also be called cultural belief systems, parental belief systems or parental cognitive models (Edwards, Knoche, Aukrust, Kumru & Kim, 2006).

In a study comparing Asian and Euro-American parents' ethnotheories of play and learning, Parmar, Harkness & Super (2004) found that Euro-American

parents regarded play as an important vehicle for early development. In contrast, Asian parents saw little developmental value in it. As a result, parental practices across both of these groups were different in the use of time and the provision of toys. As summed in Chao (1996, 2000), Asian parents generally believe in the importance of a good education for success in life.

Singapore is a Southeast-Asian nation and its people are of Asian descent. It would be tempting to generalize the ethnotheories of Singaporean parents into one uni-dimensional whole and ignore the variations that exist across ethnic groups. In reality however, notions of culture and identity can be a little difficult to pin down in Singapore because the country is primarily a nation of migrants from China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia and other parts of Asia. The members of this "polyglot Singapore tribe" speak English, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and a broad range of Chinese and Indian dialects. There are both major and minor religions (Vadaketh, 2014, p.60).

Research has found distinctive differences in the way each of these groups relate to their children. Quah (2004) for example, discovered that in contrast to Malay and Indian parents, Chinese (especially Buddhist/Taoist) parents were the least likely to demonstrate affection for their children by hugging, kissing or holding them.

It is probably because of this heterogeneity that at independence, the government sought to ingrain Singaporeans with a common set of shared values. As outlined in earlier sections of this chapter, these have included the ideological notions of meritocracy, hard work and pragmatism. They have also included the ideals of tolerance and multiculturalism in day-to-day behaviours

and national policies (e.g. racial quotas in public housing estates, use of English in schools, businesses and public administration).

The result of these policies has been a very obvious reshaping of Singaporean lives on the day-to-day. Singaporeans who are ethnically - and by that same measure, linguistically, religiously and culturally different - live, work and learn together. This integration is consistent with Lee Kuan Yew's vision of a multiracial meritocracy, "not a Malay nation, not a Chinese nation, not an Indian nation," but a country where "everybody will have his place" (Lee, quoted in Han, Ibrahim, Chua, Lim, Low, Lin & Chan, 2011a, p.219).

Whilst not dismissing the invariable dissimilarities that exist across the various ethnic groups in Singapore, these aspects of shared values (and the government policies that have constituted these values) may be conceived as the larger "culture" from which parental ethnotheories in Singapore draw their discursive threads and ideas. In other words, given the existence of the macro-political, social and economic context, the focus of this study will be "Singaporeans" regardless of race, language or religion. Where they occur however, the study will maintain a respect for, and sensitivity towards the perceptions, attitudes and thought-patterns of individual families and parents, especially when these are evident in the form of parental ethnotheories.

Of course, it is also possible to reason that Asian parental ethnotheories have allowed ideologies like meritocracy and pragmatism to take root. In turn, these beliefs have themselves made up the essence of current parenting practices that have become, in an iterative manner, repeatedly justified and validated over time. More information about the adult and child participants who took part in this study will be described in the following chapter.

Language codes and social class in Singapore.

Basil Bernstein's code theory has been criticized for being complex, ambiguous or unreadable (e.g. Pring, 1975; Gibson, 1977). However, like Bourdieu and Foucault (whose relevance in this study will be outlined in a section below), Bernstein was

> "… concerned with the principles of cultural and social reproduction and the contexts, conditions and environments which form or influence these" (Cause, 2010, p.4).

Whilst his theory has many different parts and considerations (e.g. recontextualising, classification, framing, curriculum types), I raise it here for its relevance to children's talk vis-à-vis social class. According to Bernstein (1960), there are "entirely different modes of speech found within the middle-class and the lower working-class" (p.271). Specifically, for the lower working-class, language use is limited to a speech form that

> "discourages the speaker from verbally elaborating subjective intent and progressively orients the user to descriptive, rather than abstract, concepts" (p.271).

In contrast, it is difficult to predict the syntactic options or alternatives that a speaker will use to organize his meanings in an elaborated code (Bernstein, 1964).

More importantly, Bernstein (1981) has argued that class relations "generate, distribute, reproduce and legitimate distinctive forms of communication, which transmit dominating and dominated codes" (p.327). Consequently, individuals are positioned differently by these codes as they acquire them. What happens, in other words, is that codes become "culturally determined positioning devices" and ideology is formed through and in such

positioning (p.327). Because ideology exists in, and regulates the modes of relation between classes and their specific forms of communication, it becomes a means for the realization of ideological content.

In Singapore, the matter of language is a little more complicated because "Singapore never had one common language" (Lee, 2000, p.169). The current position has been, and still is, that Singapore has four official languages – Malay, Chinese (Mandarin), Tamil and English. Malay is the "national language" but English is the "language of the workplace and the common language" (p.170). There is also the localized, colloquial variety of English, called Singapore English or Singlish (e.g. Gupta, 1998). "Mother tongue languages" (like Tamil) are deemed to be important "for personal identity, a sense of heritage and intra-ethnic communication" (Silver, 2005, p.53).

Foley (2001) has pointed out that regardless of policy discourses, English has been the "pathway to membership of the elite" (p.12). Professional and technical jobs require higher education and in Singapore, higher education can only be obtained in English. As a result, Silver (2005) argues, English has become the language of prestige and status. Over time, it has come to fulfill more capital needs (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) and become in-bred into social, family and individual "habituses". Indeed, Pakir (1997) has linked English's dominance in the linguistic field in Singapore to an intentional effort on the part of families to give their children a head start in the education system by shifting to English at home. In 2004, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, citing MOE data, reported that 50% of Primary 1 Chinese schoolchildren were using English as their home language (Goh, 2004).

Importantly, Bernstein's code theory and the notion of linguistic capital in Singapore may be seen to have two to three implications as it relates to the current thesis. Firstly, parents may be enrolling their children in English or mother tongue enrichment classes depending on the children's exposure to the language at home (Kwan-Terry, 1991) and the parents' views about which language holds more capital and hence, anticipated usefulness for their children in the future. Secondly, children in the lower socioeconomic classes may be hampered, not just in their use of a restricted code, but also by their relative lack of proficiency in English (if their home language is another language). In this way, linguistic capital becomes another source of social inequalities in Singapore, a problem that may or may not be redressed (may in fact, be heightened) through preschool acceleration practices here.

The shadow education system.

In his preface to Bray's 1999 UNESCO IIEP report, Caillods, the general editor of the series, notes that private tuition is not a new phenomenon. It has been practised for many years in both developed and developing countries. Whilst the scale of this industry varies from nation to nation, it has,

> "become part of the educational environment to such an extent that nobody really questions its existence" (p.9).

Caillods further observes that tuition may be a good thing if it provides additional resources to numerous, often underpaid teachers and university students. It can help students pass examinations too. However, he notes that cramming can come at the expense of creative learning and may not lead to an increase in human capital. Moreover, extensive private tuition can and will exacerbate

social inequalities as not everyone can afford to pay for such courses. In some countries with high rates of corruption, class teachers are the ones who organize private tuition. They may teach the most important topics from their syllabi in these private sessions only.

In Bray's analysis, private supplementary tutoring can impact mainstream schooling (1999, p.50-51). If all students receive supplementary schooling, mainstream teachers need not work so hard. Where some receive tutoring and others do not, mainstream teachers are likely to encounter greater disparities within their classrooms than would otherwise be the case. Some teachers may respond by assisting the slower learners; others may take the students who receive tutoring as the norm and permit the gaps between students to grow. In the latter situation, the pressure on parents to invest in private tutoring for their children becomes even greater.

Bray (1999) describes how the differentials in living standards between individuals with different amounts of education can be greater in some countries like Singapore and Hong Kong, and less so in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia. He notes the extant belief in the former societies that if pupils keep up with their peers, their self-esteem will be protected. For most pupils though, supplementary tutoring often leads to fatigue (p.54) and other social effects (p.57). Pupils feel pressured and social or family bonds of affection may be "inevitably weakened" (p.60).

In Singapore, Leong (2010) has commented that excessive tutoring is leading to a "tragedy of the commons". The "tragedy" can already be seen in stressed teachers, rising obesity, more children requiring psychiatric help and local children having the highest myopia rates in the world. Local parents

however, tend to position acceleration/tutoring processes as being good for the child. In press interviews for *The Sunday Times* in 2010, preschool parents claimed that extra classes were necessary to prepare their children "for primary school next year" (Zachariah, 2010). Some parents confessed that they wanted their children to get a head start so as to avoid a "struggle" later on. Moreover, the parents chose programmes that encouraged their children to be "all-rounded"; that is, classes that would develop their children's confidence and an "inquisitive nature", and that were not completely academic in intent or content.

Indeed, the mother-participants in my IFS study (Chua, 2012) reported that test expectations in primary school were too high to be tackled without extra coaching (i.e. Extract 45). Teachers were reported to "go through the syllabus and the topics quite fast" (Extract 14a, lines 409 – 410) and remedial lessons were a regular feature of school-life (e.g. Extract 33). The IFS concluded by saying that a vicious cycle seemed to be at work: Parents enrolled their children in accelerative classes as a form of support for their learning. However, support from this shadow system pushed academic expectations higher and teachers responded by setting increased targets for all of the children in their classrooms. This seemed to contribute to increased anxiety and the need for more intense support from the shadow system subsequently.

Foucault, governmentality and the desubjugation of voice(s).

Liow (2011) has described Singapore as a hybrid neoliberal-developmental state. Whilst the economy has been deregulated, liberalized and

privatized, this is only “one half of the story” (p.242). There is still direct and significant state intervention in the economy.

At the same time, “governmentality” or the “conduct of conduct” (Foucault, 2003, p.147) exists. Singaporeans submit themselves to certain forms of domination because they are influenced by specific “technologies of power” (i.e. subjection). They engage in self-regulation, or Foucault’s “technologies of the self” (i.e. subjectivity) as shaped by these forms of control (Liow, 2011, p. 242).

In Singapore, “technologies of power” have been described as “an array of knowledge and expert systems to induce self-animation and self-government so that citizens can optimize choices, efficiency and competitiveness in turbulent market conditions” (Ong, 2006, p.6). Said another way, the Singaporean citizen’s “technologies of the self” gradually become aligned to that of a neoliberal ethos. Singaporeans expect themselves to be highly competitive, economically independent, self-reliant and active in the reproduction of their own well-being (Liow, 2009). They self-regulate and upgrade themselves, learn new skills and stay relevant to avoid unemployment (Liow, 2011; Yap, 2012). As a general rule, “governmentality” induces one to think that what is seen and experienced is objective and real. This “truth” is hard to shake off because it is imbued and becomes part of the self.

Foucault’s conceptions about the links between power and knowledge (1994) have led some early childhood researchers to write about the role of the early childhood professional in uncovering and challenging what is invisible in early childhood settings and practices (e.g. MacNaughton, 2005; Leese, 2011). “Governmentality” in Singapore may have resulted, for instance, in neoliberal tenets taking on the power of a dominant discourse or “regime of truth”

(Foucault, 1980; 1980a) in early education. By focusing on preschool tuition and enrichment practices, my aim is to challenge the taken-for-granted understandings about acceleration in the early years and open up new ways of thinking, talking about and representing these kinds of activities for young children in Singapore. In other words, I wish to desubjugate voices that are being silenced (Philips & Hardy, 2002). Moreover, I am interested to find out if any forms of resistance are evident amongst parents, teachers and children when they engage in such practices. For Foucault (1990), power relations are never one-directional; they always require some measure of freedom, reversibility and resistance, sites that contain the potential for change (Metro-Roland, 2011, p.151).

This however, may be a complex endeavour. Metro-Roland (2011) has pointed out that for Foucault, the "critical" in "critical theory" can only mean a "constant checking" (Foucault, 2003a, p.127). Even amongst Foucauldian scholars, there is disagreement over whether Foucault promotes a freedom of philosophy or inevitable entrapment (Butin, 2006).

Kallio (2011, p.20) proposes that to circumvent the problem of thinking in a binary fashion or of banalising or homogenizing voices (p.19), we should seriously consider "the space of betweenness" as formulated by Katz (1992). By this, she is referring to the idea of listening to voices in their sociospatial positionality. In other words, as explained by Kallio (2011),

> "both the researcher's own position and the positions of those researched… form the lens through which these processes can be critically unfolded" (p.21).

Leitner & Sheppard (2009) say it like this,

> "Positionality highlights difference, the situated understandings of subjects, groups and institutions, but also inequality and, thereby, power relations" (p.243).

This ties in very nicely with my simultaneous concern to ascertain how social class acts as a mediating factor in acceleration practices in Singapore. It embeds me firmly in the equation and clarifies my obligation to reveal my own subjectivities and concurrent positions as a mother, teacher and researcher throughout the entire research process. Most of all, I must be very sensitive to the child's voice as it is heard in his/her daily environment in all situations. As Kallio (2011) explains, children's voices are,

> "… their experiences, understandings and views (that) should inform all practices, decision-making and planning concerning childhood in general and children's lived worlds in particular, including those linked to their protection and provision…" (p.3).

Indeed, I have to be careful when conversing with preschoolers to distinguish between what is possible for them to say (Foucault, 1988) and what is possible for me to hear them say (Alldred & Burman, 2005).

Similarly, with regard to teachers, I must recognize "the message of a voice steeped in the relational world of children" (Llorens, 1994, p.7). According to Llorens, teachers' voices have long been silenced (p.8). In this study, I want to know how kindergarten teachers make sense of acceleration activities in the light of their training about developmentally appropriate practices. Moreover, I wish to understand whether and in what ways the neoliberal political rationality in Singapore has affected or subjugated their personal or professional views about teaching and learning in the early years. Finally, I seek to examine their voices or silences next to the voices of the children's parents; especially where this relates to how much or how often they believe the individual child should participate in extra-curricular lessons.

Research Questions

The overarching research questions in my study then, are as follows:

a) In what ways do the verbal and other enacted practices of Singaporean parents, kindergarten teachers and preschool children relating to academic acceleration in the early years reveal the possible workings of "governmentality" in inducing ideological reproduction, as expressed through technologies of power and technologies of the self?

b) Where, if any, are there silenced, marginalized or subjugated knowledges?

c) In what ways do the verbal and other enacted practices of Singaporean parents, kindergarten teachers and preschool children about academic acceleration in the early years reveal the ongoing and reproductive effects of habitus and capital as distinguished by social class?

d) How are these effects seen in other ways such as linguistic differences across groups, geographical space or the physical layouts of classrooms?

Importantly, much of the discourse about this topic is contested and typically couched in the form of personal opinions, shock revelations, emotional anger and/or dislike or disagreement with "what other parents are doing". By indexing governmentality, social class and desubjugation, I hope to provide a richer and more in-depth understanding of the topic through a social justice perspective and other critical social theories.

Chapter 3

Methods and Design of the Study

Introduction

To answer my research questions, I realized that it would be necessary for me to engage with an analytic method that would allow me to move beneath surface appearances (Madison, 2012). My eventual goal was to uncover processes of power inequities within the lived domain that I had chosen to study.

Because of my ontological fondness for discourse, I had proposed at the start to use critical discourse analysis as the analytic method. I explored conversation analysis, discursive psychology and the discourse analytic tradition of Fairclough (e.g. 1989), van Dijk (e.g. 1993) and Gee (e.g. 2011), before concluding that discourse analysis would not be sufficient to describe a substantial proportion of the lived realities experienced by parents in Singapore, including my own as a mother.

Acknowledging that I needed a more comprehensive framework, I delved into the ethnographic preferences of Wolcott (e.g. 1987, 2008), LeCompte & Schensul (e.g. 1999), Charmaz (e.g. 2008, 2014), Fetterman (e.g. 2010) and Madison (2012), before concluding that a study using elements of critical ethnography would better unsettle the “neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions” (Madison, 2012, p.5) that underpin social and educational life for young children in Singapore.

Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives

Madison (2012) has pointed out that method and theory are reflexively associated, yet "necessarily distinguishable" (p.20). There may be concrete procedural models to follow, but it is theory that informs the kinds of questions that are asked and the categories of data that will take priority. In fact, she illustrates an example from her own research where "theory was my method, and my method was my theory" (p.21). Accordingly, and in keeping with this nuanced distinction, I will now describe the theories that guided the procedural manner in which I went about answering the research questions; questions that - hopefully and iteratively - derived credibility in turn from the data that I subsequently collected and analysed.

Poststructuralism, genealogical un-archiving and discursive formations.

In Foucault's post-structuralism, there is always a plurality of structures at play and these need not hearken back to one unifying structure (Metro-Roland, 2011, p.147). In fact, Foucault rejects the idea that there is a universal grammar underpinning all social life. His "archaeological method" explores discourse,

> "… not from the point of view of the individuals who are speaking, nor from the point of view of formal structures of what they are saying, but from the point of view of the rules that come into play in the very existence of such discourse..." (Foucault, 1970, xiv).

In other words, to Foucault, statements and discursive regularities connected to a whole network of discursive relations affect practice(s). Moreover, there are

rules of formation for the existence of each statement and their dispersion within a domain. This “archive” of discursive practices determines what is regarded as meaningful and meaningless, and includes “regimes of truth” (i.e. series of statements that are taken to be true and thus serve as criteria for accepting or rejecting other statements). These “games of truth” might be unconscious but are powerful enough to shape our daily thoughts and actions.

Interestingly, Foucault is well aware of the tensions and problems inherent in the archaeological method. Whilst it is possible to step outside “the world of meaning” (Metro-Roland, 2011, p.148) to analyze underlying structures of discourse “objectively”, this invariably weakens the power of the method as a critical force. Additionally, Dreyfus & Rabinow (1983, xii) point out how Foucault came to see that a narrow definition of discourse could result in an “illusion of autonomous discourse”. In turn, this would neglect the significant effects that non-discursive (material) practices can have on knowledge, power and the construction of selves. Thus, the role of “genealogy” is also important as a complementary methodology. In genealogy, Foucault seeks to examine the conditions of historical change in which new structures emerge, and in particular, the way in which power relations and social practices relate to discourse (Metro-Roland, 2011, p.149).

In this study of academic acceleration amongst preschoolers in Singapore, my goal was to un-archive the “rules” that might have given rise to notions such as “a balanced upbringing”, “success and achievement” or “preparation for Primary 1”. Furthermore, I sought to study aspects of practices beyond the facet of discourse alone; for instance, the incidences when parents reported (during the interview segment) that they were not overly concerned about their

children's achievement in school but had enrolled their children in a full range of enrichment activities nonetheless.

Similarly, I was concerned to document and explain the wide variability of places and spaces – the non-discursive and material, in other words - in which tuition or enrichment lessons are being provided in Singapore. My personal experiences as a mother had surfaced considerable unevenness in the spatial and geographic forms of tuition. I had encountered, for example, a proprietor/teacher whose only focus was to grow her commercial assets at the expense of the children's safety. Her decision to act against commonsensical fire-safety principles, in spite of my urging as a fellow business owner (and one-time client) to comply with these rules, became a part of the work of my soul (Walker, 2003, p.238).

In all this, I sought to be wary of where "governmentality" and "technologies of domination" might have contributed to influencing parents, teachers and children outside of their consciousness. Foucault describes this in stronger terms: Individuals are determined, "in their situation, their function, their perceptive capacity and their practical possibilities by conditions that dominate and even overwhelm them" (Foucault, 1970, xiv). Explained another way, people's choices, even imagined ones, can be seriously curtailed by the lack of words and ideas to frame alternative possibilities.

Elements from critical ethnography.

Fetterman (2010) writes that ethnography is about "telling a credible, rigorous and authentic story" (p.1). It is both a research method and a product,

and it is not free of biases or preconceived notions. However, biases can be controlled as long as the ethnographer makes his/her specific biases explicit and incorporates controls such as triangulation, contextualization and a non-judgmental orientation. The efforts that I have taken to manage my prejudices in this study will be described in later sections of this chapter.

Fetterman (2010) continues by saying that the ethnographic study can result in "multiple interpretations of reality and alternative interpretations of data" (p.1-2). Most importantly, its overriding aim is to understand and describe a social or cultural phenomenon from the emic or insider's perspective.

There are different kinds of ethnography, including auto-ethnography and virtual ethnography (e.g. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Critical ethnography is another form of ethnography. Thomas (1993) describes critical ethnography as conventional ethnography with a political purpose. Similarly, Noblit, Flores & Murillo Jr. (2004) say that there is no clear dividing line between critical theory and ethnography. Rather, researchers who use both are re-incorporating critique in ethnography. Critical ethnography allows the researcher to

> "penetrate the borders and break through the confines in defense of… the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach" (Madison, 2012, p.6).

The aim is to arrive at knowledge that liberates as well as to act, eventually, in ways that promote social justice. Critical ethnography must aim at revealing biases so that we can,

> "probe other possibilities that will challenge institutions, regimes of knowledge and social practices that limit choices, constrain meaning and denigrate identities and communities"
>
> (Madison, 2012, p.6).

Importantly, the kind of critique that critical ethnography engages in may be drawn from Foucault where he says,

> "… as a very first definition of critique, this general characterization: the art of not being governed quite so much"
>
> (Foucault, 1997 / 2007, p.45).

Amongst many goals, critical ethnography can/must:

a) deconstruct and reinvent those epistemological certainties that rule out alternative possibilities for ordering and reordering authoritative regimes of truth;

b) discern and unveil the relationship between processes of coercion and what constitutes knowledge;

c) expose and explicate the relational processes of governmentalization and subjugation to reveal the possibility of moving beyond one's limits and transforming one's self toward desubjugation

(Madison, 2012, p.6).

Interestingly and in the same vein, Fine (1994) posits that qualitative research must allow for the "positionality" of voices where subjects are the focus and their voices the means by which indigenous meanings and experiences are carried forward in opposition to dominant discourses and practices. Noblit, Flores & Murillo (2004) take this one step further and state that positionality must be part of a "post-critical ethnography" where,

> "Critical ethnographers must explicitly consider how their own acts of studying and representing people and situations are acts of domination even as critical ethnographers reveal the same in what they study" (p.3).

In other words, the critical ethnographer must acknowledge her own power, privilege and biases, "just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects" (Madison, 2012, p.8). It is a "reflexive ethnography", a "turning back" (Davis, 1999); and in essence, a moral accountability of what we say and how we say it.

Consequently, this reflexivity requires us to ask how our own positions as critical ethnographers are affected by our own histories of colonization and deprivation. Murillo Jr. (in Noblit et al., 2004) describes this in this way:

> "My experience as an educational ethnographer, to date, can sometimes be described as travelling those blurred boundaries when Other becomes researcher, narrated becomes narrator, translated becomes translator, native becomes anthropologist, and how one emergent and intermittent identity continuously informs the other" (p.166).

Hence, the critical ethnographer must make herself much more accessible, transparent and vulnerable, even to the point of unmasking her own habitus and "contingent relations of belonging" (Rowe, 2005, p.17). These relations include "how we belong to what we know, how our epistemologies are yet another site of our belonging with and for others" (Madison, 2012, p.10). Dialogue becomes crucial in keeping the conversations between researcher and participants open and ongoing.

The use of critical ethnography in this dissertation seeks to avoid a deterministic and inflexible "structural materialism" (Pennycook, 2001, p.92). Whilst the descriptions of participants in a proceeding section will include information about their homes, lifestyles and likely socioeconomic class, I will avoid imposing a simple dichotomy of oppressor/oppressed without a fuller consideration of the context in which social identities and power relations are ascribed in Singapore.

Similarly, I aim to avoid an emancipatory modernism that is itself imperialistic (Stanley, 2013). Singaporeans are not "ideologically duped and need to have the veil of mystification lifted from them" (Pennycook, 2001, p.40). Thinking otherwise would position me as their categorizer and liberator (Stanley, 2013, p.41), a troubling situation with its own discrepancies about and involving

power. Rather, critical ethnography requires me to hold on to an epistemology that is cautious about objective "facts", simple dichotomies or essentialist categories. Like Pennycook's eventual stance, I agree that a Foucauldian (1990) attitude of "problematizing" practice will be more helpful. In other words, criticality is an ongoing process. Multiple discourses may be in play and the speaker (and listener) may take on numerous discursive positions in the course of a conversation. Either may be positioned at different moments according to specific gendered or cultural frames (Pennycook, 2001, p.44).

Facets of critical geography.

In the chapter, *The Eye of Power*, Foucault writes that,

> "A whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers – from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat"
>
> (1980b, p.149).

Aoki (2000) extends from this treatise by pointing out that whilst there are forces that seem to be pushing toward global homogenization, these same forces seem to be "simultaneously shaking things apart, fragmenting communities, regions and nations" (p.914). The sharp and growing disparities between the "haves" and the "have-nots" can be seen across and within nations and communities. He describes the paradox in this way: "The world is increasingly the same, yet the world is increasingly filled with difference" (p.915).

In this study, I have drawn on aspects of critical geography where I have looked more closely, for example, at the children's lived experience of space/place when receiving tuition/enrichment lessons and considered the

dynamic social processes that influence and are influenced by this ontological element. Soja (1996) argues,

> "… social relations become real and concrete, a part of our lived social existence, only when they are spatially "inscribed" – that is concretely represented – in the social production of social space. Social reality is not just coincidentally spatial, existing "in" space, it is presuppositionally and ontologically spatial. There is no unspatialized social reality. There are no aspatial social processes" (p.46).

As I spent time visiting the parents, teachers and children in their homes, in nearby parks, community spaces and/or their learning centres, observing and/or dialoguing with them, I began to sense the presence of an extreme divergence in spatial terms, not just across individual families/participants but occasionally too, within them.

Indeed, in Singapore, land use is often contested (Geh, 2013) and it becomes possible to begin reading spaces as "texts" (Aoki, 2000, p.920) in order to uncover the hidden underlying power relationships in them. Although 80% of Singaporeans live in public housing, there are cheaper and more expensive areas and kinds of flats. There are cheaper and more expensive kinds of tuition/enrichment centres too, not just in relation to the fees that a child has to pay in order to attend them but also, in the central-peripheral divide (and anticipated rents) and in the whole visual feel and representation of a centre. Blomley (1994) suggests that spatial distance or proximity can create affinities or maintain a social distance. Furthermore, they might constitute "deep struggles" for economic and social control (Aoki, 2000, p.920).

Personal Subjectivities and Ethics

My own positioning.

Before moving further into the specific methods used in this study, it is important that I take a necessary digression to discuss my own positionality in relation to the research. Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992) have argued that we must be vigilant about our own paradigm and its likely effects. In this section, I aim to be explicit about my *a priori* beliefs and knowledge about academic acceleration in the early years in Singapore. I seek to be reflexive; that is, to acknowledge, manage and transcend my own subjectivities so as to deal with my influence on the text (Pillow, 2003). My foremost wish is to report on the participants' own voices and their meanings, not mine. Stanley (2013) describes the significance of reflexivity in this way:

> "… scratches of subjectivity do not render the reflexive researcher's lens useless. Instead, knowing the location and nature of the inevitable scratches allow us to see beyond them" (p.70).

I founded my own early childhood company in the late 1990s, with the goal at the time to provide more stimulating and nurturing experiences for babies below the age of 12 months, especially after their mothers had returned to work after maternity leave and their infants had been placed in the care of a (usually foreign) domestic helper. The "Baby Buddy Network" was created to harness the power of stay-at-home mums to visit other babies within their residential area for about two hours each time. It was popular because mothers who signed their babies up for the sessions were glad that their babies were being properly engaged with an interested other for at least some part of their day,

especially when the domestic helper was needed to cook, iron or complete other household chores. On my part, I felt empowered to be able to create a "curriculum" that these Baby Buddies could use. The programme included singing, swaddling, infant massage, movement games and stories.

Eventually, the Baby Buddy Network moved into its own little office and my goal grew to extend its reach to more families. I was taken aback one day when a prospective mother called back to say that her husband had declined signing up for the programme because it seemed too much like "baby tuition" to him. Baby tuition? I was floored, not because I had lost a client, but because I had never thought of the Baby Network as anything other than "good" and "beneficial", a way of engaging with very young children in a holistic and developmentally appropriate manner.

Yet, the implicit accusation that I was profiteering commercially and engaging in a "racket" of hothousing infants has stayed with me all these years. As my company grew and began providing more and more educational programmes (including enrichment classes, the very provision being investigated in this dissertation), I found myself thinking very often about

a) the tensions between education as a social service and education as a purchased commodity; and

b) who defines what children (should) learn and how they learn,

especially when well-meaning educators (dare I say, myself?) had created or provided learning experiences that sit on the fringes of normative practices.

Significantly, the growth of my early childhood company happened without the backing of government funds and without the explicit objective to serve the poor and needy in society specifically. Ironically therefore, I should be the last

person to criticize the workings of a neoliberal, market-driven government when its laissez-faire policies have permitted me to grow as an education professional, albeit outside of the public domain. I have no moral right to criticize other education entrepreneurs and there is no logical reason for me to complain that wealthier families are able to accrue significantly more symbolic capital for their children when these kinds of families have been my company's core client group for the past 20 years.

These issues are at the very heart of the tensions that I have experienced as an educator for a very long time. It was through the EdD course that I developed a more mature perspective about early childhood education, and indeed, life and the world that I inhabit. I know *now*, for example, that the commodification of education in a society marred by socioeconomic inequalities can lead to even greater injustices. I have experienced firsthand the deep regrets knowing that a significant proportion of preschoolers in Singapore cannot afford the fees that are required to enroll in any one of my kindergartens.

Yet, at the same time, I have also experienced the distressing situation when we have not had sufficient funds to pay the rent or award teachers their yearly bonuses. The regular clashes that I have had with landlords demanding unreasonable rent increases with every renewal of a tenancy agreement, especially when that landlord has been a government-linked corporation, have been the stuff of nightmares and sleepless nights. Through these wars, both metaphorical and real, both internal and external, there have been the ideological contradictions too. I have resisted succumbing to the parents who have demanded evidence of "achievement". I feel empathy for my teachers when they must produce "results".

Invariably, when society is competitive (especially when it is as competitive as Singapore is), the parent is not spared either. My position as the researcher of this study cannot be detached from my identity as a mother of three children, all of whom have received some form of tuition or "enrichment" in the course of their young lives. There has been the regular stream of home tutors and/or the weekly *multiple* trips to and from various tuition centres near our home, covering additional support in "Singapore Math" and Mandarin.

Significantly, where do these personal subjectivities leave me as a critical ethnographer? I have been a participant of multiple roles in this acceleration "game" (Bourdieu, 1984) for two decades. My claims to understanding and accurately describing academic acceleration in Singapore can hardly be objective but this emic perspective does, in my view, highlight the recognition and acceptance of multiple realities (Fetterman, 2010, p.21). In fact, my efforts since the pilot study and IFS to collect data outside of my own experiences and to link these to broader philosophical, theoretical and sociological frameworks have been about incorporating both the emic and etic perspectives when analyzing this phenomenon of academic acceleration in the early years in Singapore. In the next section, I will discuss the insider/outsider dilemma of my research in greater detail.

The insider/outsider dilemma.

Kikumura (1998) has summed the insider versus outsider debate as one that hinges on the differences between group membership, special insights and empathy/sensitivity on the one hand versus objectivity and scientific detachment

as a non-member on the other. At the same time, Wilkinson & Kitzinger (2013) write that

> "similarity and difference are neither unitary nor fixed categories; they can be partial, and they can shift…" (p.251).

This is echoed by Rabe (2003) when she notes that the status of the researcher is

> "neither static nor one-dimensional. To be an insider or an outsider is a fluid status" (p.150).

At times, the roles could even overlap.

Indeed, my role in this study was continually fluctuating, depending on whom I was interacting with. At times, I was clearly an outsider and at other times, an insider. There were times when I was both. As a Singaporean for instance, I was able to code-switch, whenever needed, into Singapore English (Singlish) to establish an immediate warmth and rapport with the parents, teachers or children. The parents knew that I was a mother; the teachers understood that my professional background was in early childhood education.

In spite of these, there were also moments of significant distance. My educational level, even when compared against the upper-middle class parents, was higher. My personal context as an upper-middle class mother set me apart from the parents from the lower income groups. Ethnically, the Malay and Indian parents would have seen me as a member of the dominant race in Singapore. The children would have probably seen me as an adult, regardless of the child-centred `methods' that I sought to use to make them feel comfortable around me.

Rabe (2003) believes that it is possible as an outsider to make the journey into the group as an insider. In fact, the journey `in' reveals a lot about those

being studied, especially in the variances between initial information/attitudes and later information/attitudes. The same analogy is used by Nielsen and Repstad (1993) but in the opposite direction. To them, insider research is a journey from nearness to distance and back. I have made both of these journeys, criss-crossing the metaphorical landscape countless of times, sometimes simultaneously.

In the process, I have tried to maintain a conscious humility and integrity about my researcher role, along the three dimensions that Rabe (2003) lists as being important in managing insider/outsider dilemmas; namely:

a) Who has the power?

b) Who has the knowledge?

c) Is the perspective emic or etic?

Rabe believes that the positions taken in relation to each of these three constructs are fluid. Indeed, whilst I may have had (and still have) power as the doctoral student compiling, interpreting and writing about the participants and their practices, I was also fully dependent on their generosity of time and honesty when obtaining access/consent and during data-collection. At one point, after a few enrichment centres had refused to allow me to observe their lessons, I felt completely powerless and helpless. I had already reasoned as well that if my dissertation aimed at uncovering forces of power influencing parenting decisions about acceleration practices, my own actions had to be careful about the imbalanced exercise of power on my part. I have learnt that the sword of critical theory cuts both ways: I must be prepared to maintain an open-mindedness, to give up my claims if or when there are sound justifications for me to do so.

Similarly, I have recognized that whilst I do hold some knowledge of acceleration practices in Singapore, both as a parent and as a kindergarten teacher, the primary knowledges that I sought to unfurl in this dissertation lay in the hearts and minds of my participants, not me. I wanted disconfirming evidence of my own thoughts and opinions about acceleration practices if these existed, especially since I had reasoned that the practices were taking place on a very large scale, well beyond my own experiences, personal boundaries of `good parenting' or `good teaching' and worldview(s). Yet, at the same time, I acknowledge that I may have assumed too much in the course of the interviews and observations. I may not have probed enough, unlike an outsider ignorant of the situation.

Invariably, I was moving between both the emic (the insider perspective) and the etic (outsider view) when investigating this phenomenon. Whilst I sought to establish an understanding of those whom I was studying (and perhaps, my own practices as a Singaporean mother too), there were very deliberate and clear attempts on my part to identify the meaningful and appropriate conceptual schemas and categories about acceleration practices in Singapore that would be read and accepted by the wider (parenting, teaching, academic) community (Lett, 1990, pp.130-131), both here in Singapore and elsewhere, including my future examiners!

Merton (1972) has said that it is possible to embrace both insider and outsider research positions because the advantages outweigh the disadvantages:

> "Insiders and outsiders in the domain of knowledge, unite. You have nothing to lose but your claims. You have a world of understanding to win" (p.44).

Wilkinson & Kitzinger (2013) have also said that it is not possible to escape being both “insiders and outsiders”. In their view, we can only ask how the positions have been used and/or how they could be used, ethically and reflexively, to generate knowledge about, and to transform, the social world (p.254). This has indeed been, and still is, the spirit behind my research efforts and this dissertation.

Reflexivity and other ethical considerations.

Johnson & Duberley (2000) argue that there are two forms of reflexivity – epistemic and methodological. Epistemic reflexivity focuses on the researcher’s belief systems. It is the process by which assumptions may be analysed and challenged. The sections above have underscored my conscious efforts in being epistemologically reflexive. I am aware that a positivist study will probably not have generated the same kinds of power references that I have made (and will make) in this paper, although there may be overlaps in notions of meritocracy or “preparedness for primary one”.

At the same time, methodological reflexivity is concerned about the impact that the researcher has on the research setting. This requires the researcher to comply with the protocols demanded by his/her selected research tradition but also, to “avoid harm or wrong” (Watkins, 2000). This is especially important if there is a chance that “the development of knowledge can lead to change which may be positive or negative for the people… worked with or studied” (p.2).

To attain these ideals, I have – and continually plan to do - the following as recommended by Watkins (2000, p.4):

a) weigh the importance of the data against the possible harm to the study population;
b) integrate the data in such a way that its role within the cultural context is fully explained;
c) present the data in such a way that sensationalism is minimized while the contextual comprehension of the data is maximized;
d) report truthfully any scientific or cultural biases that may be inherent in the presentation of the data;
e) disseminate the data in language that is understandable to the community.

To date, I am not aware of any harm that I have brought upon any of the settings or participants who were observed/interviewed in my research. This study has complied with the recommended Ethical Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (or BERA). I have endeavoured to maintain an ethic of respect for The Person, Knowledge, Democratic Values, The Quality of Educational Research and Academic Freedom (BERA, 2011, p.4). The participants in my study were treated fairly, sensitively, with dignity and without prejudice.

In addition, all participants and enrichment centres reported here are pseudonyms. Each centre/participant was provided with written and oral information about my study beforehand and I have taken steps to ensure that none of them can be identified in, for instance, photographs or field-notes. During the data-collection process, I took steps not to disrupt or interfere with the centre's teaching activities. At the end of this course, I plan to provide each

centre/participant a written brief about the findings whilst keeping all identities confidential.

All participants, including the children involved, were given the time and space to understand the process by which they would be engaged, including the reasons why their participation was valued, how the information would be used, and how and to whom it would be reported. Preliminary information was provided in both written and oral form. The letter of invitation to children included cartoon graphics and simple language. I met with parents in preliminary meetings to explain the design and purpose of the research before consent forms were signed. I was careful to ensure that the children gave voluntary informed consent, both orally and in written form, before the research began. Examples of the information leaflets and consent forms used may be found in Appendices 3, 4 and 5 respectively.

Prior to each interview, I asked each parent to complete a short survey about his/her home details, including the ages and occupations of both parents, the number of children in their home, their ages, the classes they attended (and the frequency of attendance) as well as the kind of home that they lived in. A copy of this survey form may be found in Appendix 6. Participants were informed that their personal data would be stored securely in the researcher's personal laptop and/or book cupboard (under lock and key or password access) for the duration of the study and two years following, after which the data would be destroyed/deleted.

As a local Singaporean, I did not anticipate or encounter any cross-cultural issues that I had not anticipated in advance and/or was not able to navigate through effectively. I was never alone with any child without another adult

present. In some situations, the interview with the child was conducted in another room in the flat/house but within view and/or hearing of the parent. There was no deception or subterfuge involved in the study. Parents, teachers and children understood that my aim was to make sense of enrichment/tuition lessons in Singapore. Moreover, every participant was informed that he/she could withdraw from the study for any or no reason at any time. As a researcher of young children, I complied with Articles 3 and 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989). The child's best interests were my primary consideration at all times, and still are.

I did not pay participants nor incentivise them to participate in the study. However, I sent participants a "thank you" gift (a cake that the family could enjoy together) and a card at the end of their involvement. To my knowledge, there were no other effects from the design of this study that might have advantaged or disadvantaged one group of participants over another group.

Ensuring Quality and Credibility

Whilst the time permitted for this dissertation did not allow me to address all concerns about trustworthiness, I made provisions to bolster the credibility of the data collected and the conclusions reached. For instance, I took steps to incorporate factors that would enhance the quality of the research, in this case, qualitative educational research (Moss, Phillips, Erickson, Floden, Lather & Schneider, 2009):

a) The study involved a substantial amount of time. I had piloted it with two mothers in 2010, re-studied the topic with a different set of three mothers in 2011 and then embarked on the dissertation phase in 2012. Please refer to the table in Appendix 7 for the time-line and findings of these pilot projects. To address the limitations that arose in both the 2010 and 2011 studies, the current dissertation was designed to draw from a critical/post-structural perspective to analyze the underlying power issues in preschool academic acceleration. It has also included a wider sample of parents (from three socioeconomic groups), triangulated parent-interview data with interviews with their children and the children's kindergarten teachers, as well as with other forms of data (i.e. ethnographic observations of geospatial elements, actual acceleration practices and other naturalistic material such as worksheets and trophies).

b) For contextualization, there was a careful, repeated sifting of information sources, from Ministry publications, newspaper reports and research articles.

c) I was careful to analyse the data repeatedly to identify patterns within them (a process that has been termed "analytic induction") (Moss, et al., 2009, p.504).

d) I have explained how the study was conducted and will elaborate on how conclusions follow from the evidence. I will make an effort to show "rich details" as well as "the broad patterns within which the details fit" (Moss, et al., 2009, p.504).

Most of these provisions fall within Guba's four criteria for trustworthiness (1981; as summarized in Shenton, 2004). For instance, to meet the criterion of credibility, I adopted methods common to critical ethnography and critical geography when collecting the data. I communicated regularly with my supervisor when undertaking and writing up this research report. Previous research on early childhood education in Singapore was examined to frame the findings in the current study.

To meet the criterion of transferability, I endeavoured to provide sufficient background data to establish the context of the study and detailed description of the phenomenon in question to allow comparisons to be made. I believe that there is sufficient information about the methods used to allow the study to be repeated, thus meeting the criterion of dependability. Last, to meet the criterion of confirmability, I have made admission of my epistemological and ontological assumptions, especially where these have been drawn from specific theoretical frameworks including a critical social-justice line of thinking and questioning.

The Research Design

In this section, I aim to say more about the ways in which I went about answering my research questions. I will also describe the participants and the sites that I investigated. Importantly, the intent of this study was not to generalize to a population but to undertake an in-depth examination of academic acceleration in the early years in Singapore. The table in Appendix 8 shows the links between the research questions, the methods that I used to

answer the questions, as well as a sample of the kinds of questions that I asked and the ethnographic concepts that I used to guide my observations.

Research methods and data-collection.

The fieldwork that I undertook for this study lasted approximately nine months from January to September 2013. Whilst this was a relatively short period of time by ethnographic standards, it enabled me to see people and their behaviours in a more natural setting. Fetterman (2010) argues that fieldwork can provide a commonsense perspective to the data collected. Moreover, Wolcott (1987) writes that the length of time spent doing fieldwork does not, in-and-of-itself result in "better" ethnography. Rather, the purpose of ethnographic research is to describe and interpret cultural behaviour.

Parent survey.

The brief survey that I asked parents to fill out (Appendix 6) was to contextualize the findings, especially if the frequency and kinds of acceleration activities pursued by specific families were related to socioeconomic groupings and/or the ages of the parents, or even the ages or gender of the children studied. The survey was not a primary data-collection technique.

All of the parents interviewed completed the survey as I asked them to fill it out just before the start of the interview segment. Only one set of parents refused to indicate the kind of home that they lived in. All other parents completed the survey in its entirety. It is likely that the parents who refused to

reveal their housing-type was embarrassed to do so as housing is often regarded as a symbol of relative wealth and prestige in Singapore. Alternatively, as this set of parents was also a lesbian couple, there is a possibility that they refrained from indicating the kind of home that they lived in to guarantee their privacy. Homosexuality continues to be regarded as a criminal offence in Singapore.

I used the information obtained as part of the protocol for the interview segment. For instance, if a parent had indicated on the form that his/her child attended a phonics programme, I subsequently asked how long the child had been attending the programme, how often per week, and why the parent had signed the child up for phonics and not another subject.

Information sources.

Fetterman (2010) points out that in literate societies, documents are a valuable form of data collection. Coffey & Atkinson (2004) indicate that contexts involve documentary constructions of reality. These documentary sources often construct `facts', `decisions' or `rules' that mediate social activities (e.g. Prior, 2003). Documents can provide information about the settings being studied or their wider contexts. They can corroborate or challenge information from informants or from observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Importantly, Hammersley & Atkinson suggest that the entire research process should be informed by a wide reading of documentary sources and not just the initial stage of planning or during the course of writing up. Indeed, I have endeavoured to incorporate documentary information throughout this

dissertation by way of the literature review and discussion, but also whenever the content has best fit the topic being presented in a particular section.

In this study, documentary data was sourced in three ways. First, information about government policies was obtained from Ministry publications including official press releases, published parliamentary debates or replies, annual reports (e.g. the national budget) or Government of Singapore web portals. Second, information about specific enrichment centres was obtained from the websites of these companies, magazine advertisements and/or newsletters or brochures that had been made available to the public. Last, newspaper reports and articles were included for their value in providing content or material from journalistic perspectives or the views of the "man-on-the-street".

Interview method.

Wolcott (2008) observes that the way we ask questions is a concern that never goes away (p.61). He cites Agar (1980) who cautions that, "ethnographic question-asking is a special blend of art and science" (p.45). Even so, the two underlying questions that Wolcott believes can always frame the more specific questions asked in the actual interviews are:

a) "What do people in this setting have to know and do to make this system work?" and,
b) "If culture, sometimes defined simply as shared knowledge, is mostly caught rather than taught, how do those being inducted into the group find their `way in' so that an adequate level of sharing is achieved?"

(2008, p.74).

In the case of this study, Wolcott's ethnographic questions cohered with my goal to "unarchive" the discursive formations and "regimes of truth" that shape the practice of preschool academic acceleration in Singapore.

Each of the "conversations" that I had with parents, children and kindergarten teachers was framed as a semi-structured interview. Notwithstanding the relative looseness inherent in these sorts of conversations, I sought to include the following kinds of questions in each interview (Spradley, 1979):

a) Descriptive-Tour questions (e.g. "Can you describe a typical week for your child?");
b) Descriptive-Example questions (e.g. "What do you think of this worksheet?");
c) Descriptive-Experience questions (e.g. "What have you heard from other parents about primary school?");
d) Descriptive-Native Language questions (e.g. "Why do you say that other Singaporean parents are *kiasu* (scared to lose)?");
e) Structural or Explanation questions (e.g. "Why did you enroll your child in this programme?");
f) Contrast questions (e.g. "How was this Math programme different from the other one?").

At the same time, each conversation was held only after the observation segments in the child's respective enrichment programme had been completed. This gave rise to more material for Descriptive-Example questions where I could - and did - pick specific segments from the observation sessions to talk about. For instance, when referencing the learning centre *Coconuts*, I asked the

mother and child about the regular use of external reinforcers (rewards) such as candy, stationery items and toys. When relating with a child/parent from the *Starfruit* programme, I asked about the mixed-age and mixed-ability groupings in the lessons.

The interviews were conducted in the children's homes except in two instances. Of these two conversations, one was held in a spare room of the child's enrichment centre with permission from its Chief Operating Officer. Another parent-child pair spoke with me separately at the void deck of a block of flats next to theirs. Conversations with teachers were mostly held at their request in public spaces. These included quiet parks and a McDonald's outlet. The teachers in one centre spoke with me in the gym-room of their preschool centre with the kind support and consent of the preschool principal.

The conversations were audiotaped on a laptop computer and later transcribed by three research assistants, all undergraduates on vacation. These research assistants signed declarations in which they promised to protect the confidentiality of the data that they had transcribed (please see Appendix 9). I checked the transcriptions against the actual audio-recordings whenever I had doubts about the accuracy of the writing. Where interviews had been conducted in Mandarin (i.e. with the children's Mandarin teachers), the research assistants transcribed the conversations in both Mandarin and English.

Importantly, as I was concerned with "unarchiving" the meanings constitutive in the talk as opposed to the structural mechanisms that one could potentially deduce in such conversations, the transcripts (and their extracts) were presented and used as complete sentences with minimal symbolic conventions (please see Appendices 10, 11 and 12 for sample extracts). Taylor

(2001) argues that decisions like this (and others, such as where each analyzed extract begins and ends, and key omissions such as dates and locations) mean that the act of transcription has already become a part of the analytic process and must amount to an interpretation rather than a neutral record.

Participant observation.

Wolcott (1987) notes that in fieldwork, the researcher may rely more heavily on interviewing sometimes and on participant observation at other times. He argues that the two are not likely to be in perfect balance as one or the other will always become the preferred mode of investigation in any specific research project. Moreover, specific meanings and actions will invariably compete for the ethnographer's closest attention. Agar (1980) in fact, has stated his preference for interviewing as the primary research activity. To him, participant observation serves to check perceptions and to suggest topics for a more in-depth exploration during interviews.

At the same time, Gold (e.g. 1958, 1997) has proposed a continuum between the observer-as-participant and the participant-as-observer. At one end, the observer is totally detached. At the other, the participant is totally involved. Wolcott (2008) prefers to see participant observation as a general strategy of "experiencing" (pp.48-50), especially of what is seen and heard. Forging the balance between involvement and detachment often leads one to the role of "non-participant participant observer", that is, researchers who

> "… make no effort to hide what they are doing or to deny their presence, but neither are they able to avail themselves of the potential to take a more active or interactive role…" (p.51).

In other words, Wolcott points out that there is an inherent paradox in the role of participant observer.

Ultimately however, he recommends that researchers utilizing participant observation stay on the cautious side, becoming involved only as and when necessary to obtain the information that is needed to answer the research questions. Operating with this level of restraint is realistic, and this was the mode that I chose to use in my fieldwork. Whilst observing, I was interested to understand the phenomenon of preschool academic acceleration around a number of nodes, including:

a) Similarities and differences across families, settings and/or practices;

b) Enactments of "governmentality";

c) Symbols of social class;

d) Expressions of academic acceleration (including the use of specific kinds of worksheets, or the length of time spent in lessons per session, day or week).

I visited each of the enrichment centres attended by the children in this study at least twice. If I had been given access into the classrooms, I stayed for the entire duration of these lessons (which typically lasted for between sixty to ninety minutes per session). If I had not been granted access, I watched entry and dismissal times (spending about half-an-hour per centre) but sometimes more if the children's parents wanted to chat further or have me accompany the child into or from the classrooms afterwards. In every observation session, I took field notes (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013, p.48) and aimed at a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p.6) that included descriptions, sketches and reflective notes.

A sample of the field notes that I took when observing lessons in the various enrichment centres may be found in Appendix 13. Samples of simple classroom maps and photographs of artefacts such as worksheets or workbooks have been presented in Appendix 14. A few examples of the children's drawings of their enrichment classrooms, classmates and/or teachers may be found in Appendix 15.

Sampling.

In this section, I aim to say more about the participants with whom I conducted my study as well as the sites that I investigated. Importantly, and as mentioned previously, this study was a qualitative inquiry. Its aim was not to generalize to a population but to develop an in-depth exploration (Creswell, 2008, p.213) of preschool academic acceleration in Singapore.

Selection of participants.

In all, I studied twelve parent-child pairs across seven different enrichment companies, as well as ten of the children's kindergarten teachers. These numbers were considered ideal because I did not want my capacity to provide a deep picture of academic acceleration to diminish with the addition of more cases or sites. In addition, I was constrained by time and the complexity of my analytic model, itself an outcome of the earlier pilot and IFS projects.

A table listing the (pseudonyms of) parents, children and the enrichment centres that they attended (as well as brief descriptions about each of them)

may be found in Appendix 16. Another table, listing the kinds of kindergartens that the children attended as well as salient information about the kindergarten teachers interviewed, has been documented in Appendix 17.

I set out with the aim of achieving "purposeful sampling" (Creswell, 2008, p.214); that is, I wanted participants (and sites) that would constitute sources of rich information (Patton, 1990, p.169) about the central phenomenon of preschool academic acceleration. At the same time, I wanted a heterogeneous set of participants to provide a broad range of perspectives on the topic. Hence, I also engaged in "maximal variation sampling" (Creswell, 2008, p.214), incorporating individuals (and their families) who differed on ethnicity, gender, occupational status and socioeconomic background.

Significantly, I should add here that because of the nature of my questions, I was led to families who engaged in preschool academic acceleration rather than those who did not. Whilst a distinct minority, I believe that there are families who do not enroll their children in acceleration activities in Singapore. Their reasons for refraining from this practice warrant a separate investigation, an examination that I could not afford to undertake in this study because of the constraints of time. Their views nevertheless, are likely to be highly significant and should be studied, as they would add important facets to our understanding of this phenomenon in Singapore as a whole.

I should also point out that in the initial stages, I encountered difficulties recruiting participants and centres. I had planned at the outset to select participants through enrichment centres who were willing to participate in my study. Unfortunately, of the dozen or so centres that I approached at the start,

only one agreed to be part of the research. This first centre, *Spinach*, put me in touch with Shan and her family.

Given my aim to sample purposefully and to achieve maximal variation, I then sought the help of friends to distribute my invitation letters to relatives, acquaintances and their colleagues at work. This endeavour yielded another handful of participants as well as a referral to the Chief Operating Officer of *Coconuts* who put me in touch with one of his teachers in the organization's abacus programme. This teacher, Ms. Li (a pseudonym), kindly allowed me to make a presentation about my study in one of her abacus lessons and to approach mothers waiting for their children outside of her classroom. Two of her students, Jade and Kevin, were keen to participate and their parents agreed to be interviewed.

Notwithstanding the "snowball sampling" at times, my intention to have families of varying ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds represented in my study subsequently compelled me to approach two ethnic self-help organizations for assistance in the last phase of the recruitment effort. One was an organization for Malay-Muslim children. A kindergarten principal in this organization introduced me to Qaamar and her mother. The other organization, *Starfruit*, was a non-profit establishment set up specifically to serve the Indian minority in Singapore. This organization put me in touch with Amit, Sachin and Vasu and their parents, all of whom agreed to take part in the study. *Starfruit* also agreed to allow me to observe its integrated literacy and numeracy lessons that the three boys attended every Saturday.

The research participants.

In the end, the final list of participants was purposive because they included children who attended at least one acceleration activity per week. The participant group was also maximally varied and by this, I mean that the group included individuals who represented varying dimensions within the important categories of gender, age, ethnicity and socioeconomic class. There were six boys and six girls. Half of them were in Kindergarten II and another five were in Kindergarten I. One girl was 3 years old but attending an enrichment class for 4-year-olds in accordance with her mother's wishes. Six of the children were Chinese, three were Indian, another was Malay and two were of mixed parentage. In Singapore, the Chinese constitute 70% of its citizens and the remaining 30% are categorized as Malays, Indians or "Others".

Eight out of twelve of the children (i.e. 67%) lived in public HDB flats, a number that is slightly lower than the national figure of 80% but constituting the majority of the families studied in this thesis nonetheless. Three resided in private apartments and one in a landed terrace house. The children's residential profiles mirrored their parents' occupational statuses. The parents of all four of the children who lived in private housing were high-ranking executives. More information about the parents, their occupations and homes may be found in Appendix 18. For the clarification of doubt, the categorizations of the families into socio-economic classes were based on a combination of

factors including housing type, housing location, one or both parents working, parental occupations, etc.[1]

All of the families were conventional except for one lesbian couple. They had conceived their son, Kevin, in London and were back in Singapore to start a business promoting coconut oil as a "super food". Casual conversations about their lives included numerous references to their frustration with the Singapore government. As Kevin was considered to be an illegitimate child, he was not entitled to cash grants through the Baby Bonus scheme (Government of Singapore, 2016). Both of the ladies in this union wanted to be interviewed together. In the other families, only one parent was (or wished to be) interviewed.

Ten out of twelve of the children's kindergarten teachers agreed to be interviewed. Two teachers sat in for the interview for Qaamar, as one was in the process of taking over the job responsibilities of the other. The two teachers who did not participate in the study were never consulted directly as the kindergarten principal refused to grant me access to them, in spite of having been sent letters from the children's parents stating that they were in full support of my research.

[1] Ho & Lim (2014) have reported that some believe the middle class in Singapore consists of a highly heterogenous group. Other than using household income as a measure, type of dwelling, education level, marital status and employment should also be used as "proxies" to sub-divide the middle class. At the same time, figures from the General Household Survey of 2015 have indicated that 24% of Singaporeans live in 1- to 3-room HDB flats, 32% live in 4-room flats, 24% live in 5-room and executive flats, whilst 20% live in condominiums and landed property (Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2016). In my study, the smallest dwelling(s) I encountered were those of 4-room flats. I also recorded details about parental occupations, marital status, etc. I did not record data about household income as I had already encountered difficulties recruiting participants and did not want to undermine the trust that I was seeking to establish with the participating families. Given these complexities, I have chosen to use the terms "lower SES", "middle SES" and "higher SES" when classifying the families in this study and when reporting on the outcomes (e.g. please see Appendix 18 and throughout the rest of this thesis). In other words, these groupings should be viewed as categories *relative to each other* and not objective measures.

Of the teachers interviewed, all were female. Two were Mandarin teachers and originally from China. They were working in Singapore on employment visas. The rest were Singaporeans. Of the eight Singaporeans, one was Indian and two were Malay. The teacher for Yin was originally from Myanmar but had become a naturalized Singaporean. The teachers were interviewed as subject and/or class teachers of the children, where their subjects corresponded to the subject that the child was receiving tuition or enrichment for.

Selection of the enrichment centres.

A description and analysis of the enrichment schools attended by the children-participants in this study may be found in the table in Appendix 19. There were seven companies altogether and all of them owned or operated subsidiary branches/centres in other parts of Singapore (e.g. Ai attended the north branch of *Bananas* and Chun attended its central branch). Of the seven companies, four allowed me to observe their lessons. They were *Starfruit*, *Coconuts*, *Lemons* and *Spinach*, all marked bold in the table.

Of the centres that refused, including the other centres at the outset that had declined participating in my study, all cited concerns about privacy as well as the confidentiality of their teaching methods and the content of their lessons. This apprehension about intellectual property persisted in spite of my assurances that all of the information learnt through the study would be anonymised and kept confidential.

In the end, I was very fortunate that the centres that did agree to participate in the study represented a good range of organizations that operated in this sector in Singapore. Most were commercial centres with the exception of *Starfruit*, which was a non-profit organization. Moreover, and possibly because of the competitive commercial environment in which they were operating, each centre offered programmes that were distinguishable (sometimes only slightly) from each other. For instance, *Bananas* specialized in Mandarin enrichment whilst *Spinach's* focus was on Math. *Zucchini's* emphasis was on Phonics whilst *Coconuts* provided Abacus, Art and Ballet.

Significantly, I have reasoned that an important advantage gained by the research from this variation is that any consistencies or recurrent themes emerging from the data are more likely to be attributed to other (possibly broader) causes and not because of reasons specific to a particular subject or place only. At the same time, any differences in opinions or perspectives from the participants can be more easily traced since these differences are likely to map onto clear demarcations (e.g. between the commercial and non-profit organizations).

Research settings.

The research settings studied in this dissertation included four sites of classroom observation/participation (in bold in Appendix 19) and nine sites where interviews took place at home. In addition, I also observed the external environments of three enrichment locations (underlined in Appendix 19). The sites for interviews (for parents and their children) were mostly undertaken in

the children's homes (names italicized in Appendix 18). My observations of and reflections about these sites - including "outcroppings", features that stick out in the social or spatial environment (Fetterman, 2010, p.61) - were incorporated into my field notes (Appendix 13).

In total, a large swathe of geographical locations was covered during the data-collection phase. Enrichment classes were observed in four regions of Singapore: *Starfruit* in the west and *Coconuts* in the east, *Lemons* in the south and *Spinach* in central Singapore. I also observed the external environments of *Zucchini* and *Bananas* branches in the north and centre of Singapore.

The locations of the children's homes varied considerably too. Amit, Vasu, Qaamar and Yin lived in the west of Singapore. Jade lived in the east. Of the children from the high-income homes, Chun, Shan and Redford lived in central Singapore and Kenny lived in the south. Although Ai lived in the north in a public HDB flat, her mother asked that the child-interview be conducted at Ai's gymnasium where she attended a weekly evening training session. The parent-interview with Ai's mother was conducted at the national polo club at her request. Her husband worked as a jockey at the club and she had previously been employed there as a groom.

Her reluctance to have me in her home (similar to the lesbian couple's) affirmed a largely prevalent through oft-unspoken understanding that housing type in Singapore is packed with far more connotations about wealth and privilege than many would dare to admit. Spaces and homes in the Central Business District (CBD) and in the Orchard, Holland and Bukit Timah (central) areas (where Chun, Shan and Redford resided) are extremely expensive. In 2013, a two-storey house at Nassim Road, described as "the world's most

expensive home on sale", was priced at S$242 million (Vanderborg, 2013). In contrast, a 3-room HDB flat in Jurong West (where Amit, Vasu, Qaamar and Yin lived) sold for S$290,000 in October 2014.

Similarly, the cost of renting or purchasing commercial space in the central region of Singapore (where *Bananas* and *Spinach* were located) would have been far more expensive than space in the west (where *Zucchini* occupied a small unit in a commercial HDB block). Significantly, *Starfruit* rented temporary premises, a seminar room in a community centre in the west, close to where the three boys, Amit, Sachin and Vasu lived. There were distinct differences in the environments afforded by these contrasting higher-income vs. lower-incomes spaces, even amongst the commercial enrichment centres which ostensibly must see their client-groups originating mainly from the areas surrounding their respective location(s). My findings about the effects or significance of these geospatial factors in the children's learning, and how it relates to preschool academic acceleration on the whole, will be described in the next chapter.

Analysis of the data.

Wolcott (2008) writes that there are three outcomes of research: description, analysis and interpretation (p.53). In this study, I was keenly aware that the descriptions, analyses and interpretations of the data that I had collected would be coloured by my critical goal of problematizing academic acceleration as it currently stands and is practiced in Singapore. From the interview conversations, I sought to determine how power relations had contributed to people's beliefs and assumptions about the ways in which

children *have to* learn. In spatial attributes – of homes, centres and interview sites - as well as in observations of enacted practices and interactions (for instance, in the use of candy and external rewards as a motivator in lessons), I aimed at uncovering forms of unconscious subjugation that had cascaded from the very echelons of political ideology to the very ways in which children's lives had been ordered according to these assertions.

I analyzed the data in an iterative way, going over the data repeatedly whilst noting features of interest concurrently. I searched for patterns with internal convergence and external divergence (Guba, 1978). From the transcribed conversations, I developed matrices in which I could "see" each participant's response vis-à-vis another participant's comments, line by line. I compared these matrices across the categories of parent, child and teacher. Additionally, from the observational data, I compared features that were, to me, socially, economically or politically significant. These included "outcroppings" such as a centre's physical surroundings, the ways in which tables and chairs were arranged in the classroom and/or signs of relative wealth or poverty in the children's homes (e.g. physical size and layout, location, the presence of toys and material goods) and so on.

Within each of these classifications, I further sought to develop sub-categories that were responsive to the research questions, sensitive to the data, exhaustive, mutually exclusive and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 2009). The coding that I engaged in was "analytic" and not descriptive. It emerged from interpreting and making sense of the respondents' comments (Richards, 2005) as well as the observational data collected through the lens of post-

structural theory. More details about the analytic framework that I used may be found in Appendix 7.

Limitations of the Study

Invariably however, I am aware that there are shortcomings in the study too. If more time had been made available to me, I would have wanted to study a wider sample of families, including families who did not enroll their children in acceleration classes. I would have wanted to spend more time with families from the "sandwich class" (Tham, 2013) as well as those with fewer cultural, symbolic and financial resources available to them.

In addition, I would have wanted to observe more enrichment/tuition centres and interview the educators who teach in these places. Anecdotes taken off press reports have hinted that quite a number of these enrichment educators are actually trained Ministry of Education teachers who have left the government school system to pursue teaching in the shadows. The question that invariably arises from this and begs answering is, quite naturally, why?

In spite of these limitations, I believe that my research has been useful in other ways. For one, it marks a start to a deeper, more critical analysis of this phenomenon in Singapore, one that is well beyond mere grumbling, rhetoric or ad-hoc theorizing. The act of "problematizing" academic acceleration amongst preschoolers in Singapore has uncovered multiple facets that my next chapter on Findings will aim to describe and elaborate upon.

Chapter 4

Understanding Preschool Academic Acceleration in Singapore

Introduction

This chapter will lay out the findings to my research questions. It will be organized to tackle each of the issues raised in previous chapters, starting from the effects of meritocracy on the verbal expressions and enacted practices of parents, kindergarten teachers and preschool children in Singapore. It will then examine the impact of neoliberalism and the power of "governmentality" on parental, teacher and children's discourse, outlining socioeconomic differences where these emerged and detailing silenced, marginalized or subjugated knowledges too. The last section will describe the effects of social class differences on the geographical space and physical layouts of the classrooms and enrichment centres used by the children, as well as the residential spaces inhabited by the parents/children in this study.

Political Reckoning in Notions of Academic Acceleration

In Singapore, deep-seated beliefs about the necessity for meritocracy and pragmatism on the part of the people to ensure the country's ongoing survival as a nation go hand-in-hand with the neoliberal tenets of competition and a self-regulating free market; both within the country (including the field of education) and at the international level, where Singapore has been ranked the second most competitive city in the world for five years in a row (Chia, 2015). In my

study, I found that these notions expressed themselves in the early childhood years in various ways; for example, in opinions about achievement and concerted attempts at “not losing out”, in the use and desirability of rewards (both real and imagined, in the enrichment classroom or in the future) as well as in a consumerist perspective about the cost versus benefits of attending acceleration lessons.

Meritocracy and Academic Acceleration

Parents.

Ten out of twelve of the parents interviewed made references to the competitive ethos in Singapore society and local schools. Importantly, this climate had forced them to accelerate their children’s learning so that their children would succeed in keeping up or staying ahead of other students.

Occasionally, the parents also reported that the intensity of competition in Singapore schools was compounded by a difficult curriculum. Qaamar’s mother (QM) for example, explained how the children had to be strong in English in order to comprehend and analyse problem sums in Math. The kindergarten years therefore, was a time of preparation for primary school, and this had become something of a social norm. Singapore society had become very `kiasu’ (scared to lose) (Extract 3, lines 1130 to 1137)[2].

Significantly, for many of the parents, much of the talk about supplementary classes was tied specifically to the competition for good schools

[2] Three sample extracts may be found in Appendices 10-12 of this thesis. I have left references to other extracts within the text of this chapter for speed of identification if or when required.

and better economic outcomes in the future. Jade's mother (JM) stated that a good school would provide Jade with a good environment that would build her confidence and place her amongst good friends (Extract 6, lines 1274 to 1308). To Chun's mother (CM), schooling for future economic gains was something of a personal tension, but she had rationalized it as a necessary process notwithstanding (Extract 7, lines 1793 to 1821).

Interestingly, many of the parents' assumptions about the meritocratic conditions in school and work-life, and Singapore society in general, also appeared to express themselves in opinions about the use of material rewards and incentives in enrichment lessons. The significance attached to economic wellbeing in `The Singapore Story' seemed to predispose many of the parents to accept the use of tangible reinforcers as a convention or necessity to keep their children motivated in class, and/or a minor evil that could be excused. One of Kevin's mothers (KVM1) for instance, reasoned that the candy and chocolate treats were something that she was "willing to overlook" as the lessons were "still a beneficial influence" (Extract 8, lines 1836 to 1839).

Some of the mothers referenced the children's capacity to delay gratification as being an incidental but positive outcome of the teaching methods used in the enrichment school(s).[3] SNM, for example, pointed out that when "properly incentivized", the work would get done "very fast" (Extract 12, lines 789 to 791). She did not mind the use of incentives as long as the children "don't get immediate gratification out of it" (Extract 12, lines 811 to 817).

The mothers in this study, in other words, appeared to be quite accepting of the rules of the game. The transactional, somewhat behaviourist manner of

[3] It is unclear whether the mothers were aware of research highlighting the role of delay-of-gratification abilities in predicting positive academic, social and health outcomes later in life (e.g. Mischel, Shoda & Peake, 1988; Duckworth, Tsukayama & Kirby, 2013).

adult engagement with the children - resulting in the expectation of being rewarded, but also waiting to be rewarded - was regarded as something appropriate or even helpful in the course of achieving acceleration outcomes.

Teachers.

Interestingly, all ten of the kindergarten teachers interviewed also referenced the competitive schooling environment in Singapore – but in addition, the `kiasu' (scared to lose) convictions of Singaporean parents – as being the primary driving forces behind acceleration efforts in the country. In fact, one of Qaamar's teachers, QT1, expressed her concern that expectations of children's achievement were gradually being pushed down to the *in-utero* stage (Extract 14, lines 388 to 406).

In spite of this "scared to lose" mentality held by parents, many of the teachers expressed empathy for the parents' position as academic watchdogs. Jade's teacher (JT) went so far as to state that it was all the doing of "the government and their system"; Singaporean parents were merely "protecting" their children by wanting them to "have the best" (Extract 17, lines 374 to 394).

Significantly, and though sympathetic, eight of the ten teachers expressed their own personal/professional resistance or ambivalence towards academic acceleration for young children. Shan's teacher (SNT), for example, said,

> "It's not fair for the child. It's not appropriate in terms of theory, um, in terms of – um, as an educator… I mean, I feel that it is not necessary to have tuition" (Extract 18, lines 613 to 618).

For these teachers, resistance or ambivalence was often accompanied by a tension about the kind of teaching methods to employ in their own lessons.

Yin's teacher (YT), for one, described her experiences (and ongoing fears) about parents withdrawing their children from her kindergarten because they wanted more academic work and obvious results (like writing skills) than a `learning through play' pedagogy would provide.

It was evident that for these teachers, notions of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) were foremost in their minds. YT said,

> "I learnt from ah, diploma, and the learn-through-play is very important. You know, can learn from language, and then Maths, all the skills, you know. Play - but parents, most of the parents don't understand. They only judge by the, their uh, worksheet or their books only" (Extract 19, lines 970 to 986).

Similarly, Chun's teacher (CT) indicated that if parents wanted to send their children for enrichment classes, they should consider creative ones like "drawing" lessons (Extract 20, lines 362 to 371). Kenny's teacher (KT) described how she would encourage the children to express themselves creatively in journal writing or through hands-on manipulatives and games.

For the kindergarten teachers interviewed in this study, academic acceleration to achieve merits was not a priority goal. Other pedagogical concerns; in particular, holistic, creative, play-based and socio-emotional aims, seemed to feature quite prominently in their talk. This contrasting perspective seemed to stem from "theory" and training in the early-childhood "diploma" (as alluded to by SNT and YT above).

Children.

Seven out of twelve of the children interviewed referenced the importance of attaining positive performance outcomes and material rewards in their

enrichment lessons. Of the five who did not, three of them (Amit, Sachin and Vasu) were from the lower SES group. They attended the weekend enrichment classes organized by their ethnic self-help group, *Starfruit*, and their parents had reported having to pay very little for these classes. My observations of these lessons indicated that material reinforcers were indeed, hardly ever used by the *Starfruit* teachers. It is likely that the teachers sought to cultivate an atmosphere of trust, collaboration and consensus in their lessons, as they were there to `help' the children as part of a larger social service.

Redford (R) had quite a lot to say about the need to attain performance goals in the enrichment centre and school in general. His remarks betrayed a strong sense of competition that revolved around being "smart" or "good" (as in knowing "a lot of stuff"), getting things right or "wrong" and/or being "the best/worst one" (Extract 22). Similarly, during her interview, Jade (J) showed off her achievements and reasoned that this would put her in good stead in primary school (Extract 23, lines 1120 to 1131).

For Shan (SN), a child in the higher SES class, the reasoning was even more far-sighted. She wanted to be a teacher (Extract 24, lines 976 to 995) and she wanted to "know about all these Math things" even if it meant giving up a favourite activity like swimming (Extract 24, lines 1013 to 1023). For Shan, achievement (and the accompanying hard work and competition to reach these performance goals) had been internalized, so much so that she would choose to attend a class rather than indulge in a recreation.

Importantly, when speaking about the enrichment classes that they attended, the children would also talk about the nice treats that their teachers would reward them with. These treats ranged from food, stationery and stickers

to “trophies” and large manipulative toys. Jade, for one, admitted that the best part of the abacus lessons was the candy (Extract 25, lines 1338 to 1341). Redford brought out a wooden woodpecker toy that he had received at *Bananas* and referred to treats as “free gifts” that “everyone” would receive (Extract 26, lines 952 to 961). Shan showed trophies that she and her brother had earned. One trophy was for achievement “three years ahead” of expectation (Extract 27, lines 276 to 287).

Some of the children said how much they disliked the class when tangible rewards were absent or limited. Chun (C) for instance, stressed how “lame” her lessons at the *Raisins* reading class were because there was “NOTHING there”, “they only give me stickers” and “they just let me read book” (Extract 28, lines 1882 to 1893).

Significantly, not only did the children in this study seem aware of the importance of earning merits, these merits were oftentimes (or more immediately perhaps) constituted as material and desirable things. This seemed to reinforce the pragmatic notion that if an individual were to work hard or train up now, he/she would be able to attain measurable benefits in the future. Furthermore, three other patterns seemed to arise in the discourse; first, by passing judgment on the quality and desirability of the specific rewards given by the enrichment teachers, it seemed that some children, more than others, felt comfortable and confident enough to exercise entitlement as a given right. Secondly, some of them, in spite of their young age, already seemed to comprehend basic notions about the market economy, of “free gifts” and the like. Last, by being taught in an atmosphere of trust (as opposed to competition) and by not referencing any need to be competitive, some of the

children (the three lower SES boys, in particular) may have unwittingly fallen out of the meritocratic game already. This is likely to have long-term consequences in their ability to reach and attain a share of the economic pie in the future, relative to the capacity of the children in the higher SES groups to do so.

Neoliberalism and Academic Acceleration

Parents.

Ten out of twelve of the parents interviewed indicated that they had signed their children up for enrichment classes because overall, the benefits gained from attending the lessons outweighed the costs. Yin's mother (YM) for instance, reported that she had seen an improvement in Yin's English within the "first few weeks" of her attending the class. Yin had become more interested in the subject, had learnt to write a to z, and could now "pronounce" the letters (Extract 30, lines 17 to 32).

Kevin's mothers (KVM1 and KVM2) similarly recounted benefits and positive results from him attending the abacus class. It was a "bonus advantage" that the abacus lessons were conducted in Mandarin: Kevin would be "picking up Mandarin in a useful, practical way" (Extract 31, lines 38 to 43). Furthermore, there was clear evidence to them that he had learnt real mathematical skills that was allowing him to answer sums correctly with few errors (Extract 31, lines 540 to 561).

When or if the perceived disadvantages of attending an enrichment programme outweighed the likely or potential benefits however, many of the

mothers were certain that they would stop their children from attending the class. Kenny's mother (KM) for instance, remarked,

> "Yeah, no, definitely if I see him, you know, not being able to, you know, grow and develop or benefit him, I would not… yeah, because we're talking about seven hundred, eight hundred dollars per term…" (Extract 33, lines 1664 to 1669).

By associating her reasoning with the financial cost of the lessons, KM seemed to project a perspective that was consumerist, almost transactional. The enrichment lessons were a service that was not inexpensive, so the economic utility after paying for it had to be worthwhile.

For Chun's mother (CM), economic utility had to take her emotions and sense of achievement as a mother into account too. She described situations where she had withdrawn Chun from classes because it had become "a little bit painful because you feel that you're not really achieving anything… I'd feel frustrated" (Extract 34, lines 1383 to 1396).

The consumerist mentality characterizing the parents' views about enrichment programmes tended to spill over into other considerations and/or descriptions of what constituted a good/worthwhile place to enroll their children in. Qaamar's mother (QM) for instance, had done her due diligence. She had evaluated the centre along numerous criteria, including the physical space and quality of lighting in the classrooms, the teacher-student ratio, the ways in which lessons were conducted, whether soft skills (in this case, the acquisition of social skills) could be attained, ease of access (including parking and traffic to and from the centre) and whether the staff in the centre were friendly (Extract 35, lines 714 to 777).

Additionally, for many of the parents, teacher accountability, flexibility and feedback were crucial factors too when determining economic utility. Chun's

mother (CM) listed multiple sources from which she could ascertain that Chun was benefiting from the Mandarin lessons (Extract 36, lines 329 to 341), including “ongoing feedback” from the teachers at the enrichment centre (Extract 36, lines 356 to 388). In a related but opposite direction, Kenny’s mother (KM) cited a positive episode when the centre had acted on her feedback about a teacher’s accent (Extract 37, lines 1497 to 1499).

Indeed, teacher characteristics seemed to play a very important role in shaping parents’ perception of the (quality of the) enrichment programme. Kevin’s mothers (KVM1 and KVM2) described many positive qualities about their son’s abacus teacher, Ms Li (the same abacus teacher for Jade), including that she was gentle and exuded a good vibe (Extract 38). For Qaamar’s mother (QM), the teacher had offered to work with Qaamar individually and give her less writing to complete, moves to address the concern that Qaamar was “not progressing as fast as the other kids because of her age” (Extract 39, lines 498 to 513). Later, QM also reported that the teachers were flexible and patient (Extract 39, lines 1344 to 1349) and that the teacher’s efforts at encouraging Qaamar to keep learning were important (Extract 39, lines 1875 to 1882).

The irony is that many of these parents did not seem to recognize or verbally acknowledge the possible commercial aspects or motives for the teachers’ actions; save for Ai’s mother and the fathers of the three boys who attended the enrichment programme run by *Starfruit*, the non-profit organization. To Ai’s mother (AM), enrichment was a “massive business” (Extract 40, line 845) that “starts a whole vicious cycle… it promotes a very unhealthy atmosphere for the children” (Extract 40, lines 819 to 821). *Bananas* was accelerating the children “to keep their target market happy… parents are

being so worried about their kids being prepared to go P1" (Extract 40, lines 549 to 552). AM also recounted the time when she had attended a seminar, only to discover later that an enrichment centre had sponsored the talk. The focus was on what children should know before entering Primary one, but the list of requirements was so difficult, she said, it was obvious that the speakers were "just feeding the fear which is horrible" (Extract 40, lines 821 to 836). Why AM persisted in enrolling Ai in the Mandarin programme – a contradiction, perhaps, to her verbalized resistance to enrichment/acceleration – will be discussed in later sections of this chapter and the next.

The fathers of the three boys - Amit, Sachin and Vasu – did not address commercial concerns the way AM did probably because the lessons they received from the ethnic self-help organization were provided almost for free. Sachin's father (SF) described it as "cheap" (Extract 41, lines 44 to 55). Amit's father (AF) said that the organization was "not taking any money from us" (Extract 42, lines 116 to 123).[4] In fact, it had also given the family a computer without them asking for one (Extract 42, lines 130 to 155).

These acts of charity however, tended to amplify the fathers' powerlessness and voicelessness over matters pertaining to the quality of the programme, teacher feedback and what or how much they could ask from the teachers. For instance, none of the fathers had ever sat in on a lesson. Sachin's father said that the teachers "did not allow" observations and had never offered them the option of watching the class in action (Extract 41, lines 108 to 112). He tried to rationalize this away later by stating that a certain

[4] It is likely that the families were means-tested prior to enrollment to ascertain how much they had to pay for classes at *Starfruit*.

degree of trust was necessary on his part as the teachers were “experienced… they know how to handle the kids also” (Extract 41, lines 353 to 355).

Amit’s father validated the presence of a communication barrier between teachers and parents but he had never asked to watch a lesson because

> “How to ask? ... They giving the free teaching everything, I… not expect too much from them” (Extract 42, lines 197 to 209).

In a similar manner, Vasu’s father (VF) explicitly stated at times that the class should not be over-dependent on play as a method of learning (e.g. Extract 43, lines 1661 to 1675). However, he concluded that they “must be happy” with *Starfruit*. If they were not, they would not continue to send him for the lessons (Extract 43, lines 1768 to 1777).

Whilst the perspectives of these fathers seemed to differ quite considerably from the other parents who paid significantly higher fees for their children to attend profit-oriented enrichment centres (the latter would express their unhappiness by leaving the school or complaining), the irony is that their reasoning was in fact, no different from the rationalizations expressed by many of the other parents operating in a neoliberal educational environment. By this, I mean that they had mentally quantified the economic utility of the lessons as being worthwhile, relative to what they were required to pay (that is, very little or next to nothing).

How effective these not-for-profit lessons were however, especially in relation to what children like Shan, Jade and Kevin were learning and practicing in places like *Kale* and *Coconuts* (i.e. multiplication sums, addition and subtraction equations involving four place values), needs to be confronted and evaluated further. From a Bourdieusian point of view, the results appear to reinforce the notion that family resources tend to circumscribe how much

children learn and the quality of the instruction received; in this case, within the context of supplementary activities that are meant to bridge learning disparities. This did not seem lost on the three fathers when they suggested that *Starfruit* could do more for their children, including the quantity and quality of the feedback that the teachers could give them about their children's progress. Notwithstanding, in the neoliberal marketplace of supplementary schools (and where this intersects with the demands of a meritocratic society), the fathers had somehow concluded that some learning in the "cheap" programme was better than nothing at all (e.g. Extract 42, lines 212 to 214).

Teachers.

The kindergarten teachers in this study said very little about the commercial aspects of enrichment classes, probably because they were not employed in these centres. As the children's teachers in mainstream pre-school institutions, their primary concerns about acceleration were different from the children's parents. They tended to display a notable amount of resistance to such practices, a consistent pattern that will be explicated further in the section on governmentality and subjugated knowledges below.

Children.

The children, similarly and quite understandably, did not reference the cost of the enrichment lessons nor the quality of the instruction they received, other than to say how much they liked or disliked the classes. Frequently, they liked

the programme for the teacher, the “fun” factor or what or how much they could get out of the lessons. Interestingly, the comments of the children in *Starfruit* were not substantially different from the remarks of the children who attended the commercial centres (although the section on Voice and Academic Acceleration (Children) below will describe, in more detail, the more apparent `silence’ perceived in the children in the lower SES group concerning decisions about academic acceleration affecting them).

Even though tangible rewards were not used as a strategy in the not-for-profit programme, the children still enjoyed attending the lessons. Vasu (V) for example, referred to the pretty teachers and fun games (Extract 44, lines 504-505, 816-820, 903-904), whilst Shan (SN) talked about her patient teacher with lipstick (Extract 45, lines 600-605, 753-754) and how the enrichment classes were all “happy” places (Extract 45, lines 1718 to 1728). From the children’s points of view, their experiences in the enrichment lessons were generally positive ones in spite of the occasional complaint about a teacher or an activity. It seemed like they would make the best of the experience(s) or look forward to something in each class, although the specific incentive(s) that mattered to them differed from child to child.

Governmentality and Academic Acceleration

Parents.

Regardless of SES, pragmatism – a core tenet in the ideological underpinnings of the PAP government in Singapore - was a key feature in most

of the parents' views about academic acceleration. The kind of pragmatism referenced in the conversations however, tended to take various forms. The first was a matter-of-fact goal orientation about a programme's effectiveness in teaching the right skills. Shan's mother (SNM) for instance, explained how she had arrived at the right balance of Math enrichment classes, enrolling Shan in both *Spinach* and *Kale* lessons so that she would learn the four basic operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) as well as the language skills required to tackle problem sums (Extract 46, lines 88 to 115).

Another kind of pragmatism required the individual to be realistic about schedules; in particular, the constraints faced by working parents. Sachin's father, for example, described extra classes as a `back-up' in the absence of parental tutoring "on working days" (Extract 47, lines 82 to 87). In a paradoxical twist, Yin's mother quipped that Singaporean parents were too busy "to go out anyway" so they "might as well… throw the kids to tuition centre" (Extract 48, lines 1305 to 1310).

Pragmatism in the parents' discourse also took the shape of a long-term view about consequences, in particular, the potential negative effects of not having taken the right steps to remediate a child's weakness in a specific subject. One of Kevin's mothers (KVM1) said that she wanted him to have a "good foundation" so that "it will be like, less headache for me" in the future (Extract 50, lines 8 to 18). Similarly, Redford's mother (RM) expressed her desire to avoid regrets later (Extract 51, lines 257 to 270). Importantly, this need to prevent misgivings was, to RM, very much linked to the fact that certain subjects in Singapore are "compulsory" topics (Extract 51, lines 271 to 278).

Indeed, to many of the parents in this study, academic acceleration in Singapore was propelled by the inevitability of primary school. Sachin's father (SF) put it this way,

> "… actually yah, it's very stressful also, er, but if they don't want to send their children (to) primary school, then where are they going to go after kindergarten?" (Extract 52, lines 677 to 683).

In the same vein, one of Kevin's mothers (KVM2), remarked that homework from the kindergarten was "good" because "that's required by, by the time you get into P1, so he has no choice" (Extract 53, lines 681 to 685). This notion of not having a "choice" – the outcome of `compulsory education' in Singapore – tended to position additional learning as being pragmatically "good", especially if the eventual outcomes in primary school proved positive.

The most significant aspect of parental pragmatism however, underscored the need for resilience on the part of the children when tackling their studies and extra lessons. Resilience, very much associated with Singapore's "survival" ideology, was positioned variously as being able to bear hardship, overcome challenges or demonstrate discipline and/or the right attitude. Interestingly, this belief in "resilience" supplanted differences in gender (child or parent), race and socio-economic status.

In this regard, Jade's mother (JM) described herself as being quite intrusive. She had to "force" Jade (repeated four times in the exchange) to complete the abacus homework; otherwise, Jade would not be "perfect" (Extract 58, lines 287 to 315). Later in the thread, JM also indicated that it was she, the parent, who had "no choice" in the matter. If she did not "sit with them", the children would not accomplish anything (Extract 58, lines 320 to 332). To Kenny's mother (KM), children were too young to be given the freedom to

decide on crucial matters on their own (Extract 59, lines 826 to 833). Instead, they had to develop a "never-say-die kind of… attitude" (Extract 59, lines 1568 to 1572).

At their point of intersection, meritocracy, pragmatism and neoliberalism sometimes resulted in interesting but quirky conclusions where one or both notions had to defer, metaphorically, to the other. Yin's mother (YM) for example, cited two scenarios in which being rich, rather than educated, was entirely acceptable. One could be a wealthy hawker driving a Mercedes, for instance, or a contented housewife with a rich husband (Extract 60).

Seen more broadly, the highly successful ideological work of the Singapore government in transmuting technologies of power into technologies of the self was embodied in either one of two responses from parents: on the one hand, a degree of helplessness or voicelessness to change things, and, on the other, an endorsement of the prevailing norms or actions with a considerable amount of trust in the authorities (or authority figures). Ironically, both of these responses constituted similar results in effect: that of cementing public policies about educational meritocracy (and its direct association with future economic gains) on individual actions that subsequently seemed to enact and bring to life, as it were, these policies into societal lives and rituals.

Significantly, it was the higher SES parents who tended to be more aware of learning/teaching options, yet were generally resigned to the stressful conditions in which schooling was being `done' in Singapore. Parents from the lower socioeconomic group were less questioning and more inclined to accept matters as they were, even to the point of defending or supporting weak pedagogical strategies in primary school or in the enrichment classroom.

Shan's mother (SNM), a corporate lawyer, explained it this way,

> "But I am not the Minister of Education. I have voiced my opinion but I can only voice my opinion" (Extract 61, lines 1094-1095).

Redford's mother (RM) said that she too, saw no effective means available to buck the trend. Instead, she would be "the weird one" in the "whole regimental education in Singapore" if she did not do as other parents did, unlike in America where "the opinions vary greatly, from parent to parent". In Singapore, everyone was in "the same boat" (Extract 62, lines 543 to 552).

In contrast, Sachin's father (SF), one of the lower SES parents, revealed in the interview that he was a grassroots volunteer for the ruling party and described how the use of manipulative toys in *Starfruit* was consistent with Singapore's innovative techniques in teaching. He said, "… Singapore trying to have a different approach… I think this is one of the good approach also, lah" (Extract 63, lines 308 to 312). Re-phrasing meritocracy, he positioned himself as being like everyone else in wanting his offspring to "excel in their education, their life" because only then could they "start their own life" (Extract 63, lines 843 to 850).

Teachers.

Interestingly, eight out of ten of the kindergarten teachers interviewed expressed ambivalence or outright resistance to academic acceleration. Many of them cited the need, instead, to engage children with developmentally appropriate practices. Unfortunately, there was no tangible evidence throughout the study that these views were ameliorating the worst effects of

acceleration on the children, a theme that will be taken up later in the section on Voice and Academic Acceleration (Teachers).

Whilst acknowledging the pressures that Singaporean parents were under and the usefulness of supplementary lessons in some contexts (e.g. the child would benefit from attending an enrichment lesson rather than watching television), many of the teachers felt that the child's well-being and parental involvement were more important than enrichment classes (e.g. Extract 65, lines 666 to 670, 704 to 720). Indeed, many of them expressed a deep tension between what they held dear of their professional practices in the early childhood classroom and what parents or society expected of them as educators. In the ideological battle over minds and hearts, teacher training had made a vital difference in influencing their professional values, individual worldviews and enacted practices.

Shan's teacher (SNT) for example, recounted examples of children who "do not have tuition and fare just as well, or even better than those who have tuition" (Extract 65, lines 169 to 172). To her, tuition was only necessary for those with learning difficulties; the children from well-educated parents could "understand concepts and everything pretty well, just by… listening to the teachers in school" (Extract 65, lines 179 to 187). This motif of discounting the positive effects of acceleration was reiterated in other ways. Ai's teacher (AT) indicated that Ai could recognize and read out the Mandarin characters in class, but she could not explain the meanings of the words in spite of the extra lessons at the tuition centre (Extract 66, lines 48 to 57).

Occasionally, the teachers also highlighted the immediate or direct disadvantages to accelerating a child too quickly. Chun's teacher (CT) for

example, pointed out that a child who knew more than his/her peers could become bored and “restless” in the mainstream classroom (Extract 68, lines 159 to 164). To Qaamar’s teachers (QT1 and QT2), enrichment lessons should never try to take the place of preschool, especially if the topics covered or the skills taught were similar. Otherwise, it would be “too much” for the child (Extract 69).

Jade’s teacher (JT) attributed tensions about academic acceleration to “the government… and their system” (Extract 71, lines 372 to 373). She could see a marked difference in the attitude of a “relaxed” Finnish parent whose child attended the same kindergarten. This mother was more concerned about her child being “socially and emotionally stable” (Extract 71, lines 394 to 405) than academically gifted. This emphasis on the child’s social and emotional development, as well as the use of developmentally appropriate practices in the classroom, emerged regularly in the teachers’ discourse.

Children.

Nine of the twelve children echoed the parent-group by citing pragmatic justifications when evaluating the usefulness of supplementary lessons. This was quite surprising given their young age. The pragmatism tended to take the form of what I have termed, the Value-of-Learning (but could overlap the notion of “benefits” described by parents in the section on Neoliberalism above). Like “benefits”, the children saw “learning” as both an end-goal and a means to an end (i.e. with ramifications on future outcomes). Unlike “benefits” however - and this framed as a consumerist return on a transaction - the children were hardly

calculative. Instead, their comments were matter-of-fact and revealed simple associations, reductionist arguments or taken-for-granted assumptions about the way things were (or had to be).

Yin (Y), for instance, said that she liked the Phonics classes because they allowed her to "learn new things" (Extract 73, lines 86 to 90). Jade was more specific. Studying would make her "clever". If one were not clever, he/she might "not know any words" in primary school (Extract 74, lines 1124 to 1131). But it was Qaamar's comment perhaps, that learning to read would help her to recite the Koran in the future (Extract 75) that best encapsulated the manner in which merit, rewards and outcomes have merged with pragmatic reasoning in Singapore to persuade young children of whatever family background of the importance of learning. The work of governmentality – where individuals are shaped to become hardworking learners and self-motivated workers – does appear to begin very early in Singapore. As Kevin concluded at one point in his interview, "I just worked out the sum myself" (Extract 76).

Voice and Academic Acceleration

Parents.

Half of the parents in the study asserted that they took their children's opinions or feedback about acceleration classes seriously. Kenny's mother (KM) for instance, stated that she would "always ask him" whether he liked a/the programme or not. She was quite emphatic to say that she would never drag

him to a lesson because she would never want to “rob that passion of learning from him”.

In contrast, the other half of the group of parents tended to accede to their children’s view(s) only if they were similar to their own. Kevin’s mothers (KVM1 and KVM2) for example, described how they would force him to continue with the abacus lessons even if he said that he did not want to persist with them because the teacher “is good” and “the system fits” (Extract 78, lines 300 to 307). Another time however, after Kevin had “started protesting a lot” about *Bananas*, they concluded that it would have been “mean” to have forced him to continue with the lessons (Extract 78, lines 334 to 355). This was because they themselves had observed the programme to be ineffective, inappropriate and culturally “alien”. The teachers encouraged rote learning; the mothers had witnessed a teacher (in another classroom) being physically rough with one of the students, and one lesson had included content about cartoon soldiers “gunning down the enemy” (Extract 78, lines 340 to 398).

It appeared that parents could and would – at least half of the time – override a child’s wishes about attending enrichment classes when differences arose between their perspectives and the child’s preferences. But the subjugation of some children’s voices in these kinds of decisions seemed to be accompanied, simultaneously, by a kind of parental `voicelessness’ towards acceleration too. This was most obvious when parents positioned themselves as `parents’ vis-à-vis acceleration efforts.

Specifically, ten out of twelve of the parents interviewed described themselves as being non-competitive, caring, considerate, holistic and/or child-focused. Qaamar’s mother (QM) for example, positioned herself as being

balanced and reasonable by not wanting Qaamar to be “too pressured” or “burnt out” (Extract 79, lines 680 to 686). Ai’s mother maintained that she was “doing the total opposite” by letting Ai “enjoy her kindergarten years” (Extract 81, lines 230 to 238).

By demonstrating such a striking disharmony between what they *said* about themselves and what they actually *did*, the mothers seemed to convey that regardless of their personal sentiments, acceleration was something that had to be done for the sake of the child and his/her future. Personal parental voice, even when expressed as resistance (i.e. `I am a balanced mother’) had to defer to the louder call of a superimposing ideology in action.

This kind of silencing was, in effect, no different from the complete elimination of possible counter-narratives amongst other parents (e.g. the three Indian fathers representing the lower SES group in this study who did not presume that playing by the rules of the meritocratic game in Singapore could be approached or tackled differently). They had shared their belief (described in an earlier section) that both examinations and strict teachers were “good”. But it was Shan’s mother (SNM) perhaps, who came across as being the most honest. By recounting an incident in the past where the Minister of Education had ignored her “opinion”, and then indirectly claiming her control over outcomes during the 0 to 6 years (Extract 61, lines 1112 to 1114), SNM communicated the view, in essence, that it was quite futile to resist these predominant policy forces in the national educational climate. Rather, alignment with the prevailing ethos was required.

Teachers.

Eight out of ten of the teachers interviewed indicated that the children's parents had never sought their opinions about acceleration lessons. In fact, on occasion, their views had been ignored. Shan's teacher (SNT) for example, had "… gathered that she must have some tuition outside of school but I do not know where and when" (Extract 82, lines 55 to 57). Similarly, Jade's teacher (JT) had previously assured Jade's mother that enrichment lessons were not necessary, but to no avail (Extract 83, lines 214 to 223).

Significantly, for JT and at least two other teachers, the ongoing lack of open dialogue between them and the parents of their students seemed to stem from an absence of reciprocity on the part of the children's parents. Yin's teacher (YT) confessed that she had never met Yin's mother as the latter had been "quite busy" on the day of the parent-teacher conferences (Extract 84, lines 1377 to 1387). For Vasu's teacher (VT), both parties were hardly in contact – "whenever I send emails… there's hardly any communication there" (Extract 85, lines 419 to 422).

In spite of these dialogic gulfs, it was evident that the teachers knew what parents thought and desired about acceleration lessons. Shan's teacher (SNT) for instance, had concluded that parents "have their own views" (Extract 65, lines 189 to 190) because they "are preparing children for primary school… especially for P1" (Extract 65, lines 214 to 215). YT had earlier also remarked that, "most of the parents don't understand". Instead they evaluated teaching/learning effectiveness on the basis of worksheets and books (Extract 19, lines 983 to 986). It seemed that the underlying deference expressed by

teachers towards parental voice and decision-making was premised on the belief (and in some cases, confirming experiences) that the parents were `clients', both of the enrichment schools that they had enrolled their children in, as well as the kindergartens that these teachers were employed in. YT told of the stress that she had felt when a parent had withdrawn a child from her class because of differences in expectations about writing skills (Extract 19, lines 1178 to 1188).

In the neoliberal marketplace of preschools and enrichment schools for the young, the teachers seemed to position themselves discursively as employees and providers of a service. Subsequently, they could be `heard' only when it pertained to giving pedagogical feedback about a child's progress. They could not be expected to change mindsets about acceleration on behalf of the children. The invisible meritocratic master behind Singapore's education policies required them to show results quickly and their recommendations to parents that pertained to a more humanistic pedagogy were often rebuffed. The poignancy in the idealistic assertions made by Jade's teacher (JT) about age-appropriate teaching for example, was palpable simply because Jade's mother could only focus on the impending stress of primary school:

> "There is no need for enrichment to push them any further. Just send them to school as usual, just speak to the teachers… but the parents are so scared… they say that primary school system is <u>so</u> difficult" (Extract 17, lines 247 to 255, 300 to 308).

Interestingly, all ten of the teachers had genuinely positive things to say about the children-participants. Nevertheless, a more cynical perspective, prejudiced by their voicelessness as employees and service-workers, could also be that they had made these comments out of an imagined duress. In other

words, whatever their inherent love for teaching and young children, the teachers may have said positive things about the children in the study simply because they wanted to avoid being faulted or blamed if the contents of their interview(s) had unintentionally leaked back to the children's parent(s), their `clients'. Or perhaps this is how the long arm of neoliberalism might have reached into this study as well, to bias even my analysis of the teachers' talk.

Children.

All of the children in the study were generally optimistic and positive about the acceleration classes that they attended - with rewards, nice teachers, fun activities or the Value-of-Learning playing a part in determining their views - although Qaamar (from the middle SES group) and Redford (from the higher SES group) were less in favour of attending the lessons.[5] Importantly, the children's capacities to express their thoughts and feelings about acceleration classes were drawn along socio-economic lines. The children from the lower SES group displayed the most difficulty in expressing what they really thought/felt about the lessons and why. Vasu's comment, that "I like any school," seemed particularly insightful and politically correct (Extract 44, lines 704 to 712).

Two out of three of the lower SES fathers decided to accompany their sons during the interview, compared to two out of five of the middle SES

[5] Much to her mother's chagrin, Qaamar mentioned that she would prefer to attend another enrichment school. Redford commented that he could be spending his time better by working on his Lego set.

parents and one out of four of the higher SES parents.[6] These decisions gave the researcher insights into the lower SES children's `voicelessness' about decisions that affected them, which was also confirmed by some of the children's kindergarten teachers. For instance, Vasu's teacher (VT) recalled that he was very frightened of his father and had begged her not to tell the latter of his misbehaviours in class. During the interview, Vasu was relatively reticent with his parents sitting nearby. He would speak in generalities and avoid saying anything wrong, negative or offensive. Amit too, was similar in this regard. The teacher could teach "everything" and "everything, she can help". Moreover, what was salient was the manner in which Amit's father interacted with him when Amit was drawing me something as part of the interview process. The father came across as being negative, moralistic and didactic. He chided Amit for mispronouncing something and scolded him for, amongst other things, drawing only two trees for a jungle and forgetting a sun and clouds in the sky.

The three boys from the lower SES group were less able to *justify* or *explain* why they liked the lessons at *Starfruit*. In comparison to the other children in the study, they resorted to phrases like "I don't know (how to)", "I (have) forgot(ten)", "I don't want (to) say", "I never do anything" or "I never see" far more frequently.[7] Sachin for instance, was logged as having resorted to one of these avoidance phrases 16 times during the interview, Vasu 10 times and Amit 15 times. This was in contrast to the children in the middle and higher

[6] Chun's mother was forced to sit in eventually because Chun was very active during the interview and occasionally non-compliant.

[7] Tsui (1991) has pointed out that responses such as "I don't know" can mean more than a declaration of inability to supply information. It can function as an avoidance of making an assessment, a preface to a disagreement, an avoidance of an explicit disagreement, an avoidance of commitment, a minimization of impolite beliefs and a marker of uncertainty. She maintains that the pragmatic motivation behind its production is often a concern to save the face of self and other, and that the central unifying theme to its use is a declaration of insufficient knowledge.

SES groups. The average incidence of avoidance-phrases in the middle SES group was 4.6 and the mean frequency in the higher SES group was 7.75.

Whilst the incidence of avoidance phrases in the higher SES group was greater than that of the middle SES group, the children in the higher SES group engaged in utterances with a far broader range of pragmatic functions and at a significantly higher rate than that of either the lower or middle SES children. In particular, they were observed to *joke with* and/or *tease* the interviewer. They could engage in *the language of possibilities* (i.e. the language of "what if") as well. In fact, both of these discursive functions were missing in the other two groups of children.

Furthermore, the higher SES children tended to *describe* events, situations or feelings less often than the middle SES children. Instead, they were more assertive, *demanding* for things (like a particular coloured marker), *making requests* or their needs known (e.g. "I'm tired") or *asking* for assistance or clarification whenever these were needed. Overall, whilst the lower SES children were observed to only *state* or *report* on the basis of what was known (e.g. what they were capable of doing, skills-wise), both the middle and higher SES children could *express preferences* and *dislikes*, *disagree* with the interviewer (even to the point of *arguing back* and/or *resisting* ideas or comments) plus *explain* and *justify* assertions regularly. Moreover, it was in both of these groups that *complaints* were logged occasionally, as were *sarcastic retorts*. Please refer to Appendix 20 for a basic incidence log of the children's speech functions.

Socio-Economic Status and Academic Acceleration

Parents.

As recounted in earlier sections, local government policies pertaining to education have outweighed the effects of socio-economic class on parental decision-making about academic acceleration in Singapore. Whilst the reasoning or emotional reckoning that higher SES and lower SES parents engage in are somewhat different (e.g. resignation or resistance versus acceptance of public policies), the effects of governmentality in cultivating notions of “meritocracy”, “pragmatism” or “choices” – and most of all in influencing parental actions and behaviours - are widespread; especially in the national context of neoliberalism.

In short, many Singaporean parents regardless of SES believe that acceleration is both a benefit and a necessity. They engage in it because pragmatically, it is more useful for primary school (and the children’s long-term success as economically self-reliant adults) than doing nothing or watching television. Furthermore, they do not want their children to suffer the consequences of not keeping up. The wide market options of enrichment schools and enrichment programmes, including those run by non-profit organizations, permit all families to engage in the practice. In effect, “concerted cultivation” takes place for all Singaporean children, regardless of their SES status (and I should add too, their gender and race).

Having said this, the extent and manner in which Singaporean parents harness acceleration opportunities for their children can vary significantly. It is

here that previous research on the effects of socio-economic class on childrearing styles and practices may be observed. All of the parents of the higher SES children in this study reported that the children had full and busy schedules per week. Each child often had a supplementary class or activity planned every afternoon (or evening) after preschool. In Kenny's case, he attended a childcare centre that taught English in the morning and Mandarin in the afternoon. He attended *Soursops* on Saturday and two other enrichment programmes on Sunday. Similarly, Redford's mother stated that she had provided him with a reasonable schedule. It provided one afternoon free per week, which gave him time to play.

In contrast, all of the parents in the lower and middle SES bands (except for Jade) reported that their children led less busy and less structured lives, although their weekly schedules were still planned and they attended enrichment programmes, both of an academic and non-academic (creative) nature. A salient facet in this comparison to take note of, however, was that all three of the lower SES families (100%) engaged in acceleration activities at home, compared to two out of five of the middle SES families (40%) and two out of four of the higher SES families (50%). These activities included printing and completing worksheets from the Internet, reviewing spelling for school quizzes and direct tutoring. To Sachin's father (SF), this difference could be attributed to a lack of monetary resources (Extract 86, lines 1186 to 1191).

In contrast, the children from the higher SES backgrounds appeared to benefit greatly from their families' relative wealth. Measured by the hour, they spent more time in structured activities with embedded learning goals than children from the other two SES groups.

In fact, higher SES parents often let slip the extent of their financial prowess to envelop their children in material comforts and forms of cultural capital. Shan's mother (SNM) for instance, justified the necessity of swimming lessons by saying that the family's social network predisposed the children to attending pool parties and cruise holidays. Moreover, she and her husband had not limited their investment in toys, books or other resources that the children were interested in. Speaking of her son's fascination with engineering, she described that, "we have literally fed his passion" (Extract 87, lines 473 to 480).

These remarks were strikingly dissimilar to the comments made by Yin's mother (YM), who described herself as a "Singapore tourist". The family would spend their free time on activities that did not require monetary expenditure like cycling, rollerblading or kite flying. Importantly, this comment (and others like it) seemed to betray a deep consciousness on the part of lower and middle SES parents about class differences that was further entwined with the frequency and quality of learning opportunities that they could make available to their child(ren). Yin's mother seemed to say it best when she talked about Singapore schools being divided like Singaporeans, "rich, poor and average" (Extract 88, lines 597 to 599). Her children had to attend group tuition classes because individual tuition with a private tutor was far too expensive.

Another distinction that was evident in the conversations was that overall, higher SES parents tended to have higher expectations about their children's futures, regardless of whether these pertained to academic qualifications or later employment. Shan's mother had told her children that "what you have to do is that you have to get a degree" even if it were not Harvard or Yale (Extract 90, lines 1137 to 1151). In a similar vein, Redford's mother had reasoned that it

was acceptable for him to avoid attending university but only if he became a sports "star" (Extract 91, lines 1001 to 1004) and the passion was "real or reasonable" (Extract 91, lines 1030 to 1039). Quite differently, all three of the lower SES parents made no reference to education beyond primary school. Furthermore, three out of five of the middle SES parents (or 60%) explicitly stated that their children did not have to attain the first rank in class, attend university or become a lawyer or doctor.

Teachers.

Socio-economic class was a salient feature in eight out of ten of the teachers' interviews. The teachers' constructions of "parents" however, extended beyond the simple binary of "rich" versus "poor". The teachers also formulated parents as "busy" or "working" types, "involved" or "not doing enough". There were the "educated" ones, or the ones who were very `kiasu'. There were also those who, in spite of their good intentions and positive effort, were simply "not able to help" their children make progress in their studies. Vasu's teacher (VT) cited his parents as an example.

Of all of the teachers interviewed[8], VT was the most negative about Vasu's future outcomes in primary school. She expressed her concerns that Vasu's parents scolded or beat him too much. His father was "always out working and home late", the mother was "always alone and she doesn't speak any English at all to him" (Extract 92, lines 227 to 230). As a result, she found Vasu moody and sometimes incoherent in English. He found it difficult to make and sustain

[8] Unfortunately, Vasu's teacher was the only kindergarten teacher for the boys from the low SES group who agreed to be interviewed.

friendships amongst his peers too. Given these circumstances, she strongly believed that Vasu would benefit from receiving more tuition as he was lagging behind his peers both academically and socially.

Five other teachers shared VT's view that supplementary lessons would be useful for children who needed the additional support and especially if their parents were too busy or not able to help them. Two of these teachers added that rich parents tended to be more educated. As a result, they were inclined to have "high hopes" and their children were more likely to do better in school.

Children.

Two features related to socio-economic class were evident across the three groups of children studied in this research. First, large disparities in academic functioning were prominent when the lower SES and other groups were compared. Second, the children from the higher SES group came across as being more confident, but they also felt more entitled to material rewards and other forms of gain (in school and future projections of job roles and status) than their peers in the other two groups did.

Sachin from the lower SES group was unable to count as competently as the middle and higher SES children. After "… fourteen", he recited "twenty" then referred to "twenty ten" and later, "thirty ten". When asked to count in tens, he arrived at "… ninety", then reverted back to "twenty". In contrast, Jade from the middle SES group could count to thirty-six accurately and without hesitation. Chun could demonstrate the use of her abacus to deduct eight from twenty-six. It was Shan however, from the higher SES group, whose mathematical abilities

were the most advanced and unexpected of a child her age. She wrote down equations such as those pertaining to the five times table, explaining that she had learnt to do these kinds of sums in *Kale*. Later, when asked about the work that she had to complete in *Spinach*, she described it as “easy-peasy”.

This large variance in mathematical abilities mirrored the linguistic differences described earlier amongst the children in the three SES classes. Similar to research conducted by Lareau and other critical sociologists, the results from this study affirm that in Singapore, children from the higher SES classes are more likely to `do better’ than children from the lower SES groups and that `doing better’ in Singapore tends to take the shape of academic, linguistic and other soft-skill proficiencies. Importantly, these differences appear to be evident from the time the children are in preschool. A further related point is that enrichment classes are one of the means by which parents in Singapore endow and equip their children with additional forms of (symbolic) capital. However, because sociocultural and economic resources vary across families, some children receive more (e.g. knowledge, opportunities to learn, emotional support and effective teaching[9]) than others.

Indeed, the children in the higher SES groups in this study were more confident than the three boys, Sachin, Amit and Vasu. They talked more in general, complaining about the things that they did not like about the class(es) (e.g. a lack of toys or rewards), disagreeing with their parents outwardly and occasionally, reasoning in a more nuanced manner (e.g. Extract 94 where Ai says that the Bananas teacher is strict but “she also helps out”).

[9] This is a point that I will take up in the next section.

More telling perhaps was the sense of entitlement that pervaded the higher SES children's words. Shan for example, squealed in disgust when I asked her whether there was anything wrong with being a cleaner. She insisted that "others" would collect the garbage, not her (Extract 95). In the same way, Chun indicated that she would buy "diamonds" in the school canteen so that she could be "rich".

Geospatial Patterns in Academic Acceleration

Enrichment Centres.

In total, I observed lessons in four centres: *Starfruit*, *Coconuts*, *Lemons* and *Spinach*. I observed *Bananas* (two branches, in the centre and north of Singapore) and *Zucchini* from the exteriors of their premises, walking through their internal corridors to view their classrooms once per centre to accompany the child-participant(s) to or from their respective classrooms.

The geospatial differences between *Starfruit* (the programme run by the ethnic self-help group attended by Sachin, Amit and Vasu) and the other commercial centres were striking. For one, *Starfruit* was conducted within the confines of a seminar room, released on a short rental basis, within a community centre whilst the other learning centres had their own leased premises. This led to quite a unique set of circumstances and unusual pedagogical processes for the children. The children in *Starfruit* were required to sit on the tiled floor of the seminar room almost all of the time. The adult

chairs and tables that filled the seminar room were either pushed to (or stacked up at) either end (Picture 4.1).

Picture 4.1: Seminar Room in *Starfruit*

In contrast, there were child-sized tables, chairs and carpeting in the other centres with bright, interesting and colourful displays along the corridors and within each classroom. The commercial classrooms often had extra toys, play or learning materials available, including tubs of (sometimes scented) stationery and candy for use as reinforcers (Pictures 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4). In one classroom, the children could access drawers filled with child-sized whiteboards and dry-erase pens with consent from the teacher.

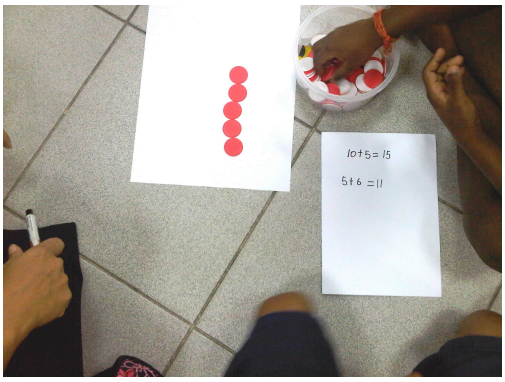
Picture 4.2: Toys

Picture 4.3: Stationery Rewards

Picture 4.4: Candy

The children in *Starfruit* did not have these sorts of provisions. Their bags were lined up along one wall of the room; they had to bend their neck backwards to look up at a narrow mobile whiteboard that the teacher wrote on occasionally.

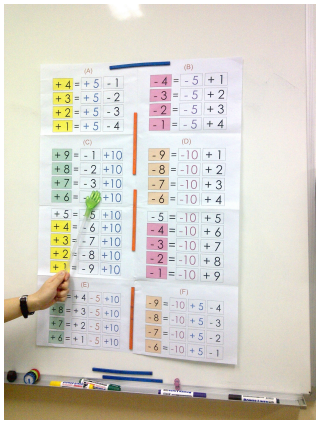
In fact, the entire *Starfruit* group was a large one that included children of different ages and abilities. This made individualization extremely difficult, even for the various sub-groups that were evident (i.e. not just older-younger children but also children with lower competencies than others). There were no learning resources available other than the ones that the teachers brought along to the lessons with them. Indeed, as the seminar room was used for other purposes at other times, the teachers at *Starfruit* were observed to teach in a somewhat haphazard manner. Different sets of learning materials appeared on different days during the observation period. One week, coloured counters were used to teach addition (Picture 4.5). The week after, linking-cubes were employed for subtraction drills (Picture 4.6).



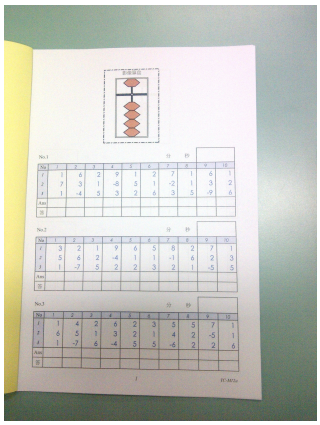
Picture 4.5: Coloured Counters at *Starfruit*

Picture 4.6: Linking-Cubes at *Starfruit*

The equations presented to the children did not seem to follow a logical pattern (as one would expect, say, “plus one” or “minus one”). Rather, as was observed in one lesson, the children were introduced to, and wrote out (on the floor) sums like 10 + 5 and 5 + 6, all on the same blank piece of white paper. Dissimilarly, all of the other centres seemed to have a set curriculum that the teachers were working through (Picture 4.7). Many had designed and self-published their own sets of workbooks or worksheets (Picture 4.8).



Picture 4.7: Abacus Sums at *Coconuts*



Picture 4.8: Abacus Workbook at *Coconuts*

Soursops had reward booklets printed with their corporate logo. *Zucchini* used learning materials from their master franchisor.

The incongruences between *Starfruit* and the other commercial centres were moderated only by the observation that *Zucchini*, whilst `private', was located in a somewhat grubby environment itself (Pictures 4.9 and 4.10).

Picture 4.9: Up to *Zucchini* (I)

Picture 4.10: Up to *Zucchini* (II)

The flight of stairs leading up to the establishment (within a short stack of flats designated for `commercial' use within the public housing estate) was old, dirty and rusty. Discarded furniture including a trolley, old bicycle chains, and advertisements for a health spa and hairdresser lined the area. Before reaching

the centre, one had to walk past an old refrigerator and the hairdresser's laundry line of towels drying on the second floor landing.

Although the internal environment of *Zucchini* seemed reasonably well-run and age-appropriate, the wider context of its setting (located just across the street from *Starfruit* and within one of the cheaper housing estates in Singapore), constituted – in spatial form – the reality that inequities in Singapore run along a continuum and do not exist in clearly categorical terms. Compared against the clean and uncluttered external environment of *Bananas* (Picture 4.11), *Zucchini* came across as being less refined and polished, catered specifically for a certain `segment of society'.

Picture 4.11: Exterior of *Bananas*

Yet, by being part of the neoliberal `paid for' landscape of supplementary provisions for young children in the nation, it still seemed able to provide a more effective teaching environment for Yin compared to charity efforts like *Starfruit*'s for the three Indian boys. Whether it is/was sufficient to bolster and/or add value to Yin's learning experiences however, relative to the educational experiences made available to children like Shan, Redford, Kenny and Chun in their separate higher SES settings, remains largely to be seen.

More importantly, having observed the variances in academic, linguistic and socio-emotional functioning across the three groups of children in this study, and compared these simultaneously against the quality of the enrichment that they receive outside of their homes and preschools, one conclusion seems forthcoming. It is the children from the lower SES group who are most badly in need of tutorial or supplementary (and I might even venture, expert) support and yet the standard of what they receive as teaching inputs is relatively weak. Unevenness in the quality of enrichment services – where charity enrichment schools help the poorer students who cannot attend commercial centres - does not bridge, in other words, pre-existing disparities, however much the myth of meritocracy may be believed. Instead, they only reinforce and reproduce these disparities because the structural mechanisms that have caused them are difficult to eliminate in the face of entrenched public policies.

Homes.

The interviews with the parents in their homes provided comparative and observational data of residential spaces in Singapore as potential places of deep struggle. Like the spaces used as enrichment centres, the children's homes were distinguished by large, significant differences in spatial layout, the amount of material goods inside and how the space(s) were used.

All of the higher SES children lived in private housing, either large private apartments or landed housing. Chun's apartment had two storeys. A grand piano sat in the middle of the living room. To reach Shan's apartment, one had to walk past a security guard as well as a large swimming pool with water

features (e.g. small fountains and aquatic plants). Upon arriving for the interview, I was greeted by her mother who was sitting in a deep massage chair. A personal masseur was at work on her legs and feet. All of the higher SES homes were filled with toys and books. Redford had his own Lego table on which he could build large, immense structures as well as his own private garden at the side of his bedroom.

In contrast, the homes of the lower SES children were all 4-room HDB flats. These are usually built with one kitchen that leads to a shared communal washing area, one living room that doubles up as a dining area and three small bedrooms. Whilst the homes of the higher SES children were more than 2000 square feet in size (if not more), each 4-room HDB flat is approximately 950 square feet in total.

The lower SES homes that I visited were sparsely furnished. Vasu's home had one sofa covered in black PVC leather and one sideboard that held his books and some of the family's possessions. His reading table was made of plastic and included two small chairs, the size of which would have been more appropriate for a toddler. Amit's home had one wire chair for lounging in as well as a table and two chairs along one wall, possibly used for multiple purposes such as family meals and homework.

Whilst the middle SES families lived in HDB flats too, their homes were usually larger (e.g. 5-room flats), were closer to the city centre and/or held more material comforts. Jade's home had a television, fish tank and a large cage for hamsters in the living room. Qaamar's home was decorated in the typical Malay style with intricate lace for tablecloths and curtains. Yin's home was cluttered with books, magazines, newspapers and family photographs.

Interestingly, hers was a `jumbo flat', one of the Housing Development Board's more creative offerings in the 1990s to attract young families to take up residence in the less popular (and more out-of-reach) areas in Singapore.

Size matters in small Singapore. Growing up, I remember the year (1984) when my family's application to move into a larger HDB was approved. It was a form of progress for ourselves as a family, a kind of `progress' that the ruling People's Action Party had continually repeated to be necessary if Singapore was to survive economically. In the common reasoning of Singaporeans, to be residing in private housing is the pinnacle of success and the relative size of HDB flats are a spatial means of measuring your journey to that apex. Indeed, the PAP's ideologies of meritocracy, pragmatism and neoliberalism express themselves geospatially in Singapore, such that housing disparities are a visual and lived means of motivating the people to continually strive to do better. The dichotomies in sharing and using (living and learning) space by the families in this study were both noticeable and striking.

Said another way, homes and enrichment centres in Singapore appear to be the physical constructions by which distributive inequities (and even individual and community identities) are ratified and reproduced. Significantly, Soja (1996) notes that in successful ideological work, these spatial outcomes possess a strikingly political meaning and seem almost natural. Foucault's "tactics of the habitat" resonate and overlap with Bourdieu's conceptions of "habitus" in multiple ways in tiny Singapore.

In tandem, all of these notions help to explain many of the spatial aspects that I observed or experienced during the study. They make clear, for instance, the preference expressed by Ai's mother to have me interview her at the polo

club rather than in her home. They also serve to illuminate the regular trans-spatial movements in the acceleration routines undertaken by some of the children. Qaamar's mother, for example, drives her to *Lemons* once a week, a place some 25 kilometres away from her flat (that is located in the `poorer' western side of Singapore). At *Lemons*, the floor is thickly carpeted and the receptionist greets the child warmly upon arrival. Everyone is required to exchange their shoes for socks before entering any of the classrooms. They must also sanitize their hands at the outset by spritzing disinfectant on them from a bottle at the reception counter.

Chapter 5

Making Deeper Sense of the Findings

Introduction

In July 2015, a *Straits Times* article reported the results of a survey that it had conducted with research firm Nexus Link. The survey had polled 501 households with children from preschool to post-secondary levels. It revealed that 40% of Singaporean parents with preschoolers had enrolled them in tuition programmes. On average, these preschool children attended two hours of tuition a week. 70% were enrolled in English lessons, followed by 40% in Mathematics and 34% in Mandarin. More than half of the preschool parents indicated that these tuition classes were to help their children keep up with others. About a third hoped that the tuition would improve their children's grades whilst 15% said that it was to help the children in their personal development. Moreover, 64% of these parents said that the tuition classes were worth spending on. 66% felt that the classes had met their expectations (Teng, 2015). When analysed further, 81.8% of the preschoolers were reported to be receiving private group tuition, 11.4% were enrolled in private one-on-one tuition and 9.1% were receiving group tuition in school (possibly in the form of remedial classes). Some of the children received a combination of two or three kinds of tuition a week (Lee, 2015).

Importantly, the results from this survey are consistent with the findings from my qualitative study. In both investigations, the kinds of enrichment classes attended by preschool children, as well as the reasons cited for

enrollment, are similar. The survey however, revealed other valuable facets to the tuition phenomenon in Singapore. For instance, when the opinions of parents of older children were considered (i.e. parents of children in primary and secondary schools), two-thirds conceded that the extra tuition had not, in fact, resulted in actual improvements in their children's academic performance in school. The chief methodologist of Nexus Link, Jack Loo, was quoted as concluding that Singaporean parents enrolled their children for tuition because of peer pressure and competition. Tuition was regarded as a "safety net" and "something that is necessary because everyone else is doing it" (Davie, 2015).

In a separate commentary published a few days after the release of the survey, Davie (2015a), a Senior Education Correspondent for the *Straits Times* lamented that the practice of tuition had become "even more entrenched" in Singapore. In 1992, at the first major survey on private tuition undertaken by the *Straits Times*, educationists had already expressed concerns about "the extent of tuition and the money being thrown at it". Now in 2014, Singaporean families were spending more, some S$1.1 billion on tuition alone according to the national Household Expenditure Survey.

Ironically, other studies have confirmed the experiences of the parents surveyed that supplementary lessons may not be effective in moving academic grades upwards. For example, data from the 2009 study of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (or PISA) ranked Singaporean 15-year-olds as receiving the most amount of tuition of 18 countries. However, those who received the extra support performed no better in the PISA assessment than those who did not (Davie, 2015a). Instead, variations in student performance could be explained more by the quality of

human capital (i.e. teachers and school principals) that was in turn correlated with teachers' salaries relative to national income (Schleicher, 2012).

At the same time, in a study entitled, "Mothers, Maids and Tutors", Cheo & Quah (2005) surveyed 429 Grade 8 students from three upper-tier secondary schools in Singapore. They examined the factors that local traditional wisdom had deemed useful in improving academic grades. They found that having a private tutor could, quite ironically, be counter-productive in the Singapore setting. Excessive studying - what they termed an "over-investment in the child" – had the potential of yielding diminishing returns. In fact, they uncovered that time spent with a private tutor on one subject did not guarantee good grades in other subjects and further concluded that this would lead to a decline in the child's academic performance overall.

Furthermore, the quality of the home environment, the number of study hours a day, last-minute study hours, homework hours a day and time spent on the computer, were all insignificant variables in Cheo & Quah's analysis. Rather, `travel time' and the `father's attitude' tended to have a more significant impact on a child's academic performance. Specifically, the longer the time taken to travel to school, and the more discouraging a father was towards his child's studies, the lower the child's grades were often correlated to be. Additionally, only high achievers were able to benefit from an increased investment in creative activities. Such an investment made no impact on the grades of lower achievers.

The current thesis was not developed to address the question of whether academic acceleration in the preschool years is worthwhile or beneficial. The results of the *Straits Times*, PISA and Cheo & Quah (2005) studies however,

contribute to the present argument in an important way. If many parents perceive that tuition is not a reliable means of ensuring academic success, and if correlational data points to the presence of other factors at work in student achievement, then the intense and widespread extent of shadow education in Singapore must stem from other reasons.

The results from the current thesis support the view that government ideology has played a considerable role in shaping thoughts and beliefs in Singapore where a competitive (schooling and economic) environment has been created that Singaporeans (from a very young age) must learn to manage, navigate and function in. This environment has succeeded in perpetuating itself in the name of pragmatism and survival, and led to very positive outcomes in international evaluations of Singaporean student achievement. However, it has also given rise to disqualified discourses and socioeconomic disparities that are in turn, reproducing themselves through schools and their processes. These schools and processes include the free market of tuition/enrichment centres that have burgeoned in Singapore, ironically aimed at bridging apparent learning gaps and providing shadow educational support to children in and from the early years.

A Few Caveats to the Findings

In his book, “Foucault, Power and Education”, Ball (2013) describes how Foucault,

> “… has unsettled my sense of the claims I might make about my work, its purposes, and its role in the enterprise of modernist human science…” (p.3).

He further points out (2013, p.85) that Foucault has said that,

> "… critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged and unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest" (1988a, pp.154–155).

Indeed, to Ball (2013, p.5), Foucault's work focuses on the discourses that are rules and regularities (i.e. organizing and "archaeological") rather than mere claims to/of truth (i.e. epistemological). When a discourse has acquired an eminent status and creates the conditions of what counts as truth, "human beings are made subjects" (Foucault, 1983, p.208) and the discourse subsequently "constrains or *enables*, writing, speaking and thinking" (Ball, 2013, p.19; italics author's own). Once these discursive structures and rules begin to operate, it becomes impossible to think outside of them. In fact, to be outside of them is "by definition, to be mad, to be beyond comprehension and therefore reason" (Ball, 2013, p.21).

These aspects of Foucault's thinking bear important implications to the current study and its findings. On the one hand, I venture that the discourse of parents, teachers and children about academic acceleration in the early years in Singapore is the outcome of a broader discourse created and promoted by the current government that has been in power in the country for more than fifty years. Yet, on the other hand, I must speak of this in a way that does not "collapse back into the techniques and pre-suppositions" from which Foucault himself wanted to "bring into critical view" (Ball, 2013, p.12). An example of such a "technique and pre-supposition" would be to claim that the findings are conclusive or "truths firmly fixed in stone" (Oksala, 2007, p.1). Another would be to bandy categories (e.g. of socio-economic class or even of

developmentally appropriate practices) without firmly acknowledging that these definitions are, in themselves, hugely problematic. Each deserves its own unarchiving and genealogy.

Nonetheless, the presence of a power/knowledge nexus in academic acceleration in the early years in Singapore is apparent. To put it another way, there has been "an absence of `turning points', of `progress' and discontinuities and the non-emergence of new forms of reasoning" (Ball, 2013, p.86). As a result, divisions between the children who (will) "succeed" and those who (will) "fail" continue to persist in an enduring way. Furthermore, the production of knowledge about success and failure in Singapore has consolidated the ruling government's claim on power and validated its hold on the population.[10] This power now flows through the spatial layouts of homes and enrichment centres, through organizational arrangements of children's schedules and learning activities, of what counts as skills and knowledge, and more.

This power/knowledge hybrid, Ball (2013) explains, is where Foucault sought to work; that is, "at the nexus where the history of practices meets the history of knowledges" (p.13-14). It is an "abstract force which determines what will be known" (Mills, 2003, p.70). Hence, by examining acceleration practices amongst Singaporean preschoolers, I have been both a genealogist and an ethnographer fascinated by the small details of learning in this country, as well as the ways in which power has become embedded in mundane practices,

[10] I will explicate on this point in more detail below. It is worthwhile to note in the interim that at the time of writing, the PAP government had won (again) a landslide victory at the polls a month earlier in spite of predictions that the opposition would gain more seats in parliament this time round. In a post-General Election commentary, Tan (2015) gave one of the main reasons for the electoral victory as "regional insecurities and economic uncertainty, a `flight to safety' mindset… (Voters) who opted for the tried-and tested PAP as the best way to deal with the real threats and those over the horizon".

social relationships and the messy and reciprocal nature of practices (Ball, 2013, p.6; Tamboukou & Ball, 2004).

Key Finding 1: The discourse of meritocracy is widely spoken in Singapore, even amongst young children, but not as much when the children are from a lower socioeconomic group.

Most of the parents in the study referred to meritocracy in different ways; as keeping up with one's peers, getting ready for primary school or a "scared-to-lose" mentality. At times, it was about competing for good secondary schools later, or better economic prospects in the future. The unspoken yet discursive organization of meritocracy as a taken-for-granted set of assumptions was most apparent when parents acknowledged material incentives in the classroom as being useful or necessary. It was also apparent in the lack of talk (for example) about leading purposeful lives or discussions about the value of activities as being creative, adventurous or developmentally suitable.

Interestingly, teachers referenced meritocracy too, but negatively as "pressure" faced by parents or empathically about "worried" parents "protecting" their children from poor (academic, economic) outcomes later. Resistance, tension and fear were palpable when teachers talked about classroom practices; in particular, whether parents would agree to methods that were more open-ended and/or whether they might move their children to another school in the course of the paper chase. Whilst teachers defended their professional views and practices, these were often subjugated or disqualified by the constraints they felt as employees or service providers. Resignation to the

status quo sometimes came across as ambivalence. None of the teachers indicated that they would or had ever disagreed with a parent directly.

Meritocracy was salient in the preschoolers' talk too, but primarily expressed as the importance of attaining good grades or high performance outcomes in school and secondly, in the earning of material rewards and incentives. For some children, this was deeply internalized, so much so that they would be willing to (and in fact, did) delay gratification and forego fun activities in order to attend acceleration lessons. Like their parents, these children made few references to creative or adventure pursuits.

This sense of subjugation of alternative discourses was even more pronounced for the children from the lower SES group, though in a slightly different way. Whilst the lower SES children understood the importance of working hard and becoming capable of reading, writing and doing sums, they seemed less aware of the stiff competition that they were (or would be) up against in school. They said little about self-actualization, being creative or adventurous, **and** earning merits or keeping up with the competition. In other words, the "rules and regularities" of the meritocratic discourse (whatever its problems) and other `empowering', hopeful ones appeared to be less visible and/or available to these children. This is ironic because meritocracy is often regarded as a "national doxa" in Singapore (Anwar, 2015). It is believed to keep citizen-motivation for personal (and hence, national and economic) progress high.

I would argue that if the language of meritocracy is inaccessible to some children in Singapore, then its discursive out-workings – namely, that equal opportunities are available to all, and/or that hard work is rewarded with

economic success and social mobility – may not be palpable to them either. In this, my Foucauldian attempt at archaeology, the unspoken truths for lower SES children may instead relate to `having enough (money)' or `learning English', traces of which were discernible within the parental interviews and class observations. These realities may impede the children from participating effectively in the race that the majority of middle and higher SES children are running, however much they (and others) might believe that the final goal and reward(s) are within their reach. To me, the analogy of the lower SES children running `alongside but on a separate track' from the main runners seems to be particularly apt, and it is not without support from other observations and analyses.

In his critique of meritocracy, Young (1958) suggested that, "the principles of meritocracy are in the end self-defeating" (Allen, 2011, p.376). A system that is "justly unequal" can seed social unrest as "apparent justice (in the administration of meritocracy) may be more difficult to bear than injustice" (Glass, 1954, p.26; words in brackets my own). At the practical level, Goldthorpe (2003) has also demonstrated that a meritocracy based on educational opportunities does not weaken the association between class origins and class destinations. Children from working-class families are less likely to opt for academic courses in higher education. They may be more risk-averse in general because of possible financial insecurities about parental income and income prospects (Goldthorpe & McKnight, 2003). Put another way, meritocracy may be the cause of its own de-legitimization for/in some social classes, and this paradox is not easily resolved.

In Singapore, attempts at mitigating the problems associated with meritocracy have largely depended on government intervention. These have ranged from positive messaging in the 2014 National Day Rally (that the contributions of Singaporeans from all segments of society are highly valued) to the injection of public funds to improve facilities, resources and the functional role of `lower-end' schools (such as the vocational polytechnics and Institute of Technical Education) (Anwar, 2015). Additionally, government leaders and local academics have emerged to offer alternative, nuanced forms of meritocracy. These include former Prime Minister Goh's conception of a "compassionate meritocracy" (Goh, 2013), the Deputy Prime Minister Shanmugaratnam's proposal of a "meritocracy through life" (Siau, 2014) and "trickle-up meritocracy" (Low, 2014, p.56).

Whether these calls for an evolving meritocracy in Singapore will result in a more balanced equilibrium in social and economic terms remains to be seen. In the interim, criticisms about the manner in which the nation's political elites have used meritocracy to their advantage are rife (e.g. Barr, 2006; Tan, 2008; Koh, 2014). Indeed, a cynical perspective of the `new' meritocratic discourse may view these tweaked, "compassionate" and adjusted attempts as nothing more than verbal appeasements to placate the populace, whilst yet holding on to the same mechanisms that eventually keep the educational (and consequently, political and economic) elites in power.

Indeed, Lim (2013) has argued that the recommendations from the 2009 Primary Education Review and Implementation (or PERI) committee to recover the egalitarian strand of meritocracy in Singapore primary education "might instead serve to further instantiate the ideology of inequality, ultimately

solidifying the elitist structure of the education system" (p.10). This is because select groups (i.e. middle-class parents) can still monopolize success for their children regardless of the definition of meritocracy (e.g. in sports, dance, etc.). Also, progressive methods in primary education – termed "innovative and engaging pedagogies" in the PERI report - echo middle-class patterns of child socialization and interaction. Without middle-class language codes, a long educational life and the presence of middle-class mothers as agents of cultural transmission and catalysts in learning (Bernstein, 1977, 1990), the education system in Singapore will most likely continue to perpetuate inequality under the guise of equality (Lim, 2013, p.11).

Key Finding 2: In spite of assertions to the contrary, "class" exists in Singapore. It mediates the extent and manner of ideological uptake across individual families and children from the early years.

In 1966, then President of Singapore, Encik Yusof bin Ishak, stressed the importance of developing a classless society in Singapore "based on equal opportunity rather than the accident of status or the possession of wealth and property" (The Straits Times, 1966). Two decades later in 1987, Lee Kuan Yew, then Prime Minister of Singapore, declared Singapore to be a "middle class society" (The Straits Times, 1987). This was because, in his view, the vast majority of Singaporeans (80%) owned the properties that they lived in.

As a consequence of these tone-setting efforts by the country's political leaders, Tan (2015) notes that in 2001, an initial survey on social stratification in Singapore found that the term "class" did not appear regularly in public

discourse. Rather, substitute labels (such as "income," as in "low-income households" or "middle-income housing") were being used instead. Tan attributed this practice to the government's attempt at avoiding a politics of envy. "Income" was a more neutral and numerical term than "class" which might have evoked Marxist conceptions of "a revolutionary working class at odds with private ownership of capital and free enterprise" (2015, p.8).

To Tan (2015, p.19), Singaporean society may now be delineated into six classes based on household income: Upper (1% earning S$20,000 or more a month), Upper-Middle (4%), Middle-Middle (11%), Lower-Middle (31%), Upper-Lower (33%) and Lower-Lower (21% earning less than S$1000 a month).[11] This, together with occupation and education measures, may be seen to form a composite index called socioeconomic status (or SES), which may further be understood in the Weberian sense of "life chances" or the likelihood of access to the economic and cultural capital of a society (p.11).

Whilst not disputing the objective value of these indices, the current study weighs in with a subjective take on "class" as constituted in talk and geospatial arrangements about academic acceleration in the early childhood years. Many analytical nodes in my study revealed that the government's work in promoting national ideologies such as meritocracy or "being resilient" have been highly effective in cultivating a hardworking and ambitious citizenry. Indeed, most of the parents in my study regardless of socioeconomic class regarded the nature of their lives, circumscribed by overlapping notions of national ideology, as unavoidable and commonsensical. The same may be said of their children,

[11] These figures have been rounded up.

most of whom saw value in learning, even if it was for other ends (e.g. reciting the Koran).

At the same time, there were significant nuances in the ways in which the different "classes" of parents and children responded to the ideas and beliefs transmitted, top-down, by the government. Families (both parents and children) from the lower SES group tended to accept the status quo without question. Higher-income parents displayed a verbal resistance to acceleration, positioning themselves as holistic and reasonable people, and oftentimes conveying how reluctant they were to push their children unreasonably with the feared result of making them unhappy about learning. Notwithstanding these assertions, they would yet use their financial resources to amass cultural and other symbolic advantages for their offspring by way of an intensive regimen of structured acceleration activities.

There are interesting and important ways in which these findings fit into Laureau's framework (2003) of "concerted cultivation" and "the accomplishment of natural growth". Whilst there are clear similarities in the research data between Lareau's study and mine (e.g. the higher-income children in my paper demonstrated a similar sense of entitlement that the lower-income children did not express); class differences and aspirations in Singapore may alternatively be seen to mediate governmental agendas, resulting in varying **shades** of childrearing practice, especially toward academic acceleration.

In America, Lareau's ethnographic research into the lives of middle-class vs. working class families concluded that there is a "cultural logic" within each social class that leads to children acquiring, respectively, institutional advantages or feelings of constraint associated with institutional expectations.

In Singapore, I offer that national ideologies **justify** higher-income parents' decisions about acceleration and **oblige** lower-income parents to ensure that their children keep up with the academic competition, even if this is achieved minimally. Furthermore, for higher-income parents, the nature of love or the presence of other competing discourses (communicated via the children's kindergartens in the form of "developmentally appropriate practices", for instance) are likely to result in **emotional tensions(s) and internal struggles about how much acceleration (or "cultivation") is enough**, especially if competition for grades and future school placements is perceived to be tight. For lower-income parents, **the struggle is manifestly external: to secure sufficient funds and resources so that their children may have enough** in the form of acceleration activities and other learning experiences, so that they are not consequently left behind in the ongoing academic race for qualifications and certifications.

In this way then, national ideologies in Singapore may be seen to construe a function beyond that of categorical powerful-powerless, dominating-dominated, insidious-transparent or unjust-just binaries. They may be **empowering** or **disabling**, subject to the specific (and I refer to this notion in the broadest sense possible) cultural worldviews held by families in their respective life situations[12]; influenced too by other macro-forces (such as neoliberalism) which I will discuss in greater detail in the section below.

This deduction however, is important for other reasons. For one, it lends credence to the contributions of other perspectives and frameworks that help make sense of children's lives and what we hope to achieve on behalf of those

[12] Or "parental ethnotheories" as described by Harkness & Super (1992); for instance, "modern Chinese parents place great emphasis on the achievement of their children" (Ho, 1995, p.25).

deemed disadvantaged. Siraj-Blatchford (2010) for instance, has argued that there is a need to engage with "the policy in action as well as in theory" (p.463). In reporting one significant finding from the large-scale Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) research project, she writes that the quality of the home learning environment (HLE) was found to be strongly and positively associated with cognitive attainment. HLE scores were, in the study, measured by activities such as reading together and teaching/playing with the alphabet or numbers. They were not, interestingly enough, correlated with parents' SES and qualifications. Rather, the EPPE findings bolstered the view that what parents do for their children is more important than who they are (Melhuish, Sylva, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2001). Families can take steps to improve the quality of their HLEs but they may choose not to, or circumstances may prevent them from doing so.

Significantly, the study found that high HLE parents engaged in parenting on the basis of beliefs that were not dissimilar to the meritocratic/pragmatic mindset that one might find in Singaporean parents. All of the high HLE parents had high expectations for their children that were expressed as aspirations that their children should attend higher education and go on to having professional careers. It may be fair to surmise then that an understanding of the meritocratic ethos that their children would have to grapple with in the larger school system eventually served as a platform for these parents to engage in stimulating and enriching learning practices at home.

That ideology can be both an impetus for good or evil is echoed by Siraj-Blatchford's appeal that, "critique is not sufficient" (2010, p.478). She cites Giddens (1984) and Sewell (1992) to say that cultural schemas or social

structures shape people, but they are also shaped, as Giddens argues, by "knowledgeable" agents who can work within structures in creative and formative ways. This reciprocity or dualism means that structures are not necessarily deterministic. Lareau (2003) describes it this way,

> "The agency of actors and the indeterminacy of social life are inevitable. It is important to keep in mind this `relative autonomy' of individuals in the enactment of social structural position and biographical outcomes" (p.250).

Importantly, what this means for endeavours of social justice (and particularly with regard to this dissertation) may be this: A reading and response to governmentality may require a more sensitive rendering of social action in order to take into account the bi-directional and reflexive effects of educational (and other social/economic) policies in Singapore. After all, as Singapore's current Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, pointed out at the St Gallen Symposium in Switzerland in May 2015,

> "If you look at Singapore today, compared to ten years ago, it's a vastly different place. Singaporeans are educated, discerning, skeptical and critical people. They know what's what. There's no doubt about it. And Singapore continues to evolve" (St. Gallen Symposium, 2015).

Indeed, in August 2015, Singaporeans re-elected the People's Action Party to form the next government in a landslide victory that had the opposition reeling. Simultaneously constructed by the PAP and likewise constructing the way the party behaves toward Singaporeans, observers noted that the party had responded to Singaporeans and dealt with hot-button issues such as the cost of living, public transport inadequacies, healthcare affordability, retirement adequacy and immigration after the 2011 General Election, "even with its back against the wall" (Tan, 2015).

Ideology may be a powerful imposition, but human agency cannot be discounted from being **the** potential and important source of change for children and families in Singapore either. Quite crucially, this view is not inconsistent with a postmodern perspective. Believing Singaporeans to be ideologically "brainwashed" or underestimating the capacity of the human spirit to recognize choices however small - and to act on better ones - may be nothing more than another form of intellectual elitism and arrogance.

Key Finding 3: A neoliberal order and the free market of enrichment schools have contributed to a hardening of "class", socioeconomic inequalities and forms of voicelessness amongst parents, kindergarten teachers and children in Singapore.

Notwithstanding the optimism pertaining to individual human effects in transforming educational processes, it was evident from my data that a neoliberal attitude towards enrichment and tuition schools has led many parents, teachers and children to regard them as presupposed features of the vast educational landscape in Singapore. Furthermore, there was a widespread enactment of "class" in the daily and persistent "cultivation" of the preschoolers' and their acquisition of academic skills. The children in the lower-income group received teaching that was of a relatively poorer standard than the children in the other two socioeconomic groups because they were dependent on charity programmes like *Starfruit* that seemed to struggle with planning, coordination and resources. The physical environments that specific enrichment schools

were situated in, and the classroom environments that they afforded the children, varied widely too.

Lee (2012) writes that neoliberalism changes the philosophical foundation and sociocultural practices of education because schooling becomes a “quasi-market” or “free-market” where parents and children are re-created as consumers and educational programmes, commodities. Indeed, it was apparent from the discursive outlays of the kindergarten teachers in this study that they felt constrained in their roles as private employees and service providers in this marketplace. When parents are “customers”, both of the kindergartens and enrichments centres that their children attend, they have the right to exercise their individual choices and not be offended by the killjoy opinions of teachers about academic acceleration, however grounded these may be in pedagogical sentiment that is strongly oriented towards other values. Ironically of course, this “freedom of choice” associated with a neoliberal order may not be a possibility for families in the lower socioeconomic groups who will acknowledge that only a handful of programmes will be realistically accessible to them vis-à-vis their disposal income(s).

More importantly, Lee (2012) makes the bigger argument that this particular notion of “choice” is “socially constructed and economically reconfigured to transform our common sense while prescribing a particular way of being, acting and behaving” (p.39). Kindergartens and enrichment centres may (and do, in fact) begin to regulate themselves through this process. They may, for instance, focus on “teaching to the test” (Gupta, 2012). They may also, as I observed, use gifts and rewards to make the children happy about attending the extra lessons and/or convey positive comments only about the

children during feedback sessions. Overt marketing strategies practised by some centres include the use of attention-grabbing phrases and journalistic-like features on “star tutors” or the offering of discounts for sign-ups in two or more subjects.

Parents also accede to a form of self-governance when they regard matters such as quality of instruction and how much to expect from the teachers and teaching programmes through the lens of what they can afford to pay. This was manifest in the remarks made by the Indian fathers about not asking too many questions or making too many demands of the instructors at *Starfruit*. Lee (2012) concludes that neoliberalism as a grand narrative results in embedded “systems of reasoning”. As conceptualized by Foucault, governmentality produces new normative understandings as well as “technologies of the self” that instruct us how to act, think and be (Foucault, 1990).

More dangerously perhaps, Tan (2012) makes the case that there are links between neoliberal-capitalist globalization, the ideology of pragmatism and the hegemonic one-party state in Singapore. Specifically, capitalist ideology is sanitized by Singaporean pragmatism to the extent that even exploitative or divisive practices are obscured. When this happens, individuals who stand to lose from the arrangement still find the market-oriented practices appealing or at least, unproblematic. He adds that pragmatism in Singapore frames economic growth as a paramount national objective that can only be secured by keeping the PAP in power. In fact, Chan Heng Chee, a former Singapore ambassador to the United States, had very early on criticized Singapore as being the “administrative state”, one that employs a bureaucratic, technocratic

and rationalized approach to government. In the process of governing, it depoliticizes the citizenry whilst cultivating it as a strong and hardworking labour force that can simultaneously appreciate the material comforts and security of an unwavering and affluent consumerist nation (Chan, 1975).

The impact of these discursive forces on early childhood education and its shadow system of enrichment schools for preschoolers is/was discernible in a number of ways. For one, none of the parents interviewed ever questioned the legitimacy of supplementary tutoring except to assert their independence from and resistance against being overly `kiasu' and/or by defending acceleration's benefits in abetting their children to becoming (economically) useful and successful people in the future. They were, as Tan (2012) describes it, unable to "imagine alternative realities and better worlds, and to formulate strategies of transitioning from the status quo to these better realities and worlds" (p.74).

Consequently too, there were few instances of parents or teachers acknowledging that academic acceleration and supplementary programmes are likely to reinforce the already competitive atmosphere in Singapore schools and Singapore society. The majority tended to see the effects as one-directional, with competition manifesting itself in acceleration practices, rather than tutoring and enrichment equally affecting/raising the standards and expectations of what/how children should learn/achieve in the early years.

Importantly, the kinds of competition that take place can be seen to operate at different moments of the child's educational journey, constituted in different ways and involving different groups, but are largely consistent with the culture of marketization associated with neoliberalism. In addition to competition across enrichment schools for consumer dollars (a competition

associated with the specific school having to prove its efficacy in improving student outcomes), there is competition between kindergartens and enrichment centres too. Occasionally, this leads to a symbiosis where kindergartens hire enrichment centres to operate supplementary lessons for their students in the afternoons (as described by Sachin's father). In this arrangement, kindergartens obtain a proportion of the fees paid for the extra classes. At other times, kindergartens seek to provide enrichment classes of their own to supplement revenue from their regular morning programmes.

There is furthermore, the invariable and symbolic competition between children as they jostle to stay ahead of the pack, as well as between parents as they learn to make decisions that will best benefit their child. These sorts of competition add to the contests that the children have to face when they finally enter primary school and begin to prepare for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). It culminates in the marketization of Self when children become young adults with fewer or more, better or worse academic/professional qualifications. At this stage, the competition will revolve around employment positions and other markers of status in Singapore (i.e. the 5Cs: car, condominium, cash, credit card and country club membership).

Ball (2004) sees "competition" as existing within a discourse of "performativity". He writes that "performativity" is,

> "… a technology, a culture, and a mode of regulation… The performances of – individual subjects or organizations – serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of `quality' or `moments' of promotion or inspection. They stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgment" (p.143).

When performativity becomes an inextricable part of the fabric of doing, thinking and being a student, teacher or parent in a competitive schooling culture,

authenticity is diminished and replaced by a veneer of plasticity. This is probably true for all private enrichment schools in Singapore that have to handle the task of “information-giving” versus “impression management and promotion” very carefully (p.149).

Key Finding 4: Enrichment centres are geospatial sites for the performance and reproduction of habitus, as well as various forms of symbolic capital.

The children in this study tended to attend supplementary classes in close proximity to their homes. *Bananas* was a five-minute walk away from Redford’s private apartment and situated within the same gated-compound. *Starfruit* and *Zucchini* were situated within the same public housing estate that Yin and the three Indian boys lived. When the children attended enrichment schools that were further away (as in the case of Qaamar and Kenny at *Lemons* and *Soursops* respectively), they were shuttled to and from these locations in private cars. Regardless of the actual physical location, an understanding of “place” can be viewed metaphorically; especially where/when the symbolic value of a site is loaded with other meanings associated with class, prestige and status.

The Singapore government is very proud of its urban planning policies that have led to the realization of large, successful projects such as City in a Garden, Marina Bay, Changi Airport, Jurong Island as well as multiple commercial and regional hubs including Tampines Regional and Novena Fringe Centres (Urban Redevelopment Authority, 2015). The URA lists, as its priorities, the goals of

a) sustaining a robust and vibrant economy;

b) providing a good quality of living and a sense of well-being for all;

c) developing the city in an environmentally responsible manner, and

d) optimizing Singapore's limited space on land and at sea.

In his talk at the St. Gallen Symposium, Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam also lauded the housing policy that requires all public housing estates to maintain an ethnic balance. Whilst "intrusive", this system had become Singapore's "greatest strength" because

> "… neighbourhoods matter, place matters, where you live matters. It matters tremendously in the daily influences that shape your life and the traps you fall into" (St. Gallen Symposium, 2015).

Ironically, the government does not regulate the sites for enrichment centres (and other small and medium-sized businesses) in the same way. Enrichment centres find their footholds in `commercial' premises that may be self-owned (e.g. *Coconuts*) or leased independently from private owners. When they are not, they may be leased from the Housing & Development Board (e.g. *Zucchini*) or the People's Association, another statutory board of the Singapore government (e.g. *Starfruit*). Regardless of these distinctions, the rental/ownership market of space for commercial uses is guided quite explicitly by practices associated with neoliberalism. When leasing from the HDB or the PA, tenders are called and bids put in by hopeful companies wishing to secure the said premises. Typically, successful bids are the ones that have offered the highest rental sums.

The economic rationality that has been invested into the procurement of these sites permeates into the profit-loss reasoning that is most apparent in the fees charged and the numbers of children served per class/teacher. Once

determined, families attending the various enrichment programmes begin to stratify quite naturally on the basis of what they can afford, both financially and logistically. Consequently, habitus and forms of symbolic capital (e.g. social and cultural) (Bourdieu, 1986; Maton, 2008; Moore, 2008) begin to be performed and reproduced unevenly in and across this broad range of acceleration settings.

Habitus as "internalized capital" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.114) – that system of dispositions that generate perceptions, appreciations and practices (Bourdieu, 1990) – was seen for instance, (and being cultivated almost) in the seating arrangements required of the children during the different enrichment lessons. As described earlier, the children at *Starfruit* sat on the floor of the seminar room whilst all other centres had the children sitting at desks and on chairs, most of which were at heights appropriate to the children's physical size. Whilst working on the floor with the teacher may reduce the distance of interaction between adult and child, the dispositions learnt (or unlearnt) may also emerge as obstructions in other institutional settings. Because they were on the floor, the Indian boys sometimes engaged in horseplay, games that were not observed at the other centres because no space had been allotted for such rough & tumble activities. In the context of sitting for tests and examinations too, the children in the other centres received far more tutoring in the behaviours and mindsets required for academic achievement than the Indian boys did. Transposed to another field of practice then, it becomes less certain that these boys will succeed, or will likely succeed less well in engaging with the hidden rules or logics of practice that are a prerequisite to the accumulation of merits in Singapore.

Holt (2008) makes the case that the embodiment of social capital can be conceptualized spatially. She uses Bourdieu's definition of social capital as being "membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital" (Bourdieu, 1986a, p.249-50). Theoretically, social capital can be measured by "the size of the network of connections" as well as "the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed… by each of those to whom (the person) is connected" (Bourdieu, 1986a, p.250).

Through the lens of these definitions, it is fairly easy to see that the spatial gravitation of families/children into enrichment centres based on affordability and home proximity can lead to the (re)production of socioeconomic differences (including `habituses' and forms of capital). As spaces pre-defined by cost and location (where the children's homes themselves have been pre-defined by factors such as their proximity to the city centre and the number of rooms inside), the social networks that result in each of these places will invariably be less heterogenous than the Singapore government might hope. The acquisition of institutionalized cultural capital (e.g. in the form of educational attainments or ways of talking) will hence be markedly different as well (Holt, 2008; Thomas & Webber, 2001).

Holt (2008) notes that fields and spaces are not static, unchangeable dimensions. Indeed, Gregson & Rose (2000) have demonstrated that the spatial contexts of performances come into being through enactments of power. For the purpose of this thesis, I believe it is not unfair to conclude that the unequal processes of capital accumulation - across spatial and symbolic planes, and inter-generationally - may be concealed within the taken-for-granted

assumptions of meritocracy set within the neoliberal marketplace of enrichment schools.

Unfortunately, there is a shaky "precarity" that can result from this unevenness (Waite, 2009). The insecurity experienced by parents may express itself in even more intense and competitive efforts to accelerate their children (as does happen), so that advantages are not perceived to be slipping by or made all the more out-of-reach over time. Whilst the circumstances are slightly different, a racial riot in Singapore's Little India district in 2013 generated this response from Professor Chua Beng Huat, head of the sociology department at the National University of Singapore:

> "Poor people, whether foreign or local, are constantly reminded of their conditions in a city with obvious wealth; frustration is inevitable…. When you have tens of thousands of people with relatively same sentiment crowded into a limited space, mass behaviour should be expected anytime; the risk is perpetual" (Harjani, 2013).

This is not to say that parents and children in Singapore are likely to revolt. However, the inequalities inscribed on our bodies, in practices and in space may be more risky than our cursory evaluations might presume, especially when these issues have been dealt with narrowly or superficially only.

Key Finding 5: Resisting or regulating the shadow system may be less effective than tilting the ideological light. Educational reforms are themselves constrained by the deeply embedded assumptions that have led to the present set of problems.

In Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato presents his famous allegory of the cave, a picture-story that many have viewed as a preamble on education and its

goals (e.g. Boyles, Carusi & Attick, 2009). In the cave, there are people who are shackled and forced to watch a play of shadows on a wall. One of these prisoners loosens his chains and turns to see a fire. He realizes that the shadows are mere sensory manifestations that have emerged because of the light, their source. After reaching the light, the freed prisoner is compelled to return to the cave to free the remaining prisoners so that they too, may see the light behind the shadows.

Mark Bray has described acceleration activities as shadow education because the tutoring imitates that of regular schooling. In *Regulating Private Tutoring for Public Good*, he and Kwo (2014) recount that it was then-journalist, Cherian George, who first used the metaphor in Singapore in 1992. Bray's 1999 book for UNESCO, *The Shadow Education System: Private Tutoring and its Implications for Planners*, gave four reasons to justify and explain his continued use of the term (p.1):

a) tutoring exists only because the mainstream education system exists;
b) the size and shape of tutoring changes when the size and shape of the mainstream education system changes;
c) in almost all societies, much more public attention is focused on the mainstream system than on its shadow; and
d) the features of the shadow system are much less distinct than those of the mainstream system.

In addition to these features, and on the basis of my findings in this current study, I believe that there is a fifth aspect that may be added to Bray's list: **The forms and functions of the shadow system are not likely to shift unless the ideological light that produces it is tilted or positioned differently.**

The enduring trouble with this shadow however, is that it gives the impression that a monster (e.g. the threat of academic underachievement) is lurking in the dark. It is not then, unproblematic. Bray (2009) lists problems associated with tutoring that have economic, social and educational impacts (p.30-46). He points out that in some countries, private tutoring replaces the mainstream especially near the time of major external examinations.

Where resistance to academic acceleration occurred in my study, it was confined to verbal assertions and not performed by way of say, a complete elimination of the practice. Shan's mother for example, reported writing to the Minister of Education once to give negative feedback about school stress, but was providing her children – proportionately – the most number of enrichment programmes (including two programmes for Math) each week. As explained by Foucault (1990), the power made evident in people's lives and constituted by their actions, is productive.

Bray & Kwo (2014) write that the government must be responsible for "the quality and impact of education not only in their own institutions but also in the private sector" (p.62). He cites the 2014 version of the annual *EFA Global Monitoring Report* that stated,

> "Private tuition, if unchecked or uncontrolled, can be a detriment to learning outcomes, especially for the poorest students who are unable to afford it…. management policies are required to ensure that teachers teach the assigned number of hours and cover the whole curriculum so that private tutoring does not displace classroom teaching" (UNESCO, 2014, p.271).

Bray & Kwo (2014) further cite the 1996 UNESCO *Report of the International Commission on Education for the 21st Century* chaired by Jacques Delors in which four pillars for education systems and processes were recommended: learning to know; learning to do; learning to live together and learning to be

(Delors, 1996, p.97). The Report highlighted the importance of paying equal attention to each of these four pillars,

> "… so that education is regarded as a total experience throughout life, dealing with both understanding and application, and focusing on both the individual and the individual's place in society" (p.86).

Unfortunately, Bray and others have observed that these suggestions have not resulted in tangible shifts on the ground (e.g. Tawil & Cougoureux, 2013). One of the reasons given for this is the entrenched view of education as an instrument of social stratification. Whilst there are certainly cultural, social and economic differences across the nations where academic acceleration is prevalent, competition (for merits and scarce economic goods) continues to be the primary means by which masked ideological beliefs (about `the way things are' or have to be) take root and thrive. As Bray & Kwo (2014) further observe,

> "… once shadow education becomes engrained in the culture, it cannot easily be reduced" (p.70).

In spite of this, both authors firmly believe that educational reform via state monitoring and regulation of the tutoring sector is necessary even though enforcement may be demanding in both personnel and finance. In their view, the balance lies in concrete policy initiatives such as the registration of tuition/enrichment companies once they have reached a certain size, financial reporting for the purposes of taxation, the imposition of building standards and so on. They contrast these recommendations against prohibiting tutoring directly because attempts at banning the practice in other countries have failed (e.g. Cambodia, Myanmar, the Republic of Korea). Ultimately, policies should look at addressing the root cause(s) of the demand rather than the superficial

symptoms, especially because the root causes "concern culture and economics" (Bray, 2009, p.76).

This of course, is easier said than done. Scheurich (1994) talks about "policy archaeology" – the grid of conditions, assumptions and forces that make for the emergence of a social problem and the social legitimacy of policy solutions. His call for a Foucauldian unarchiving echoes Bray's (2009) concern that even commonsense strategies like reforming examinations, increasing quotas for higher education and enhancing public confidence in mainstream school systems may be fraught with "many vested interests" plus tensions that will need to be managed carefully (p.77). In Singapore in 2013, then Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, Lawrence Wong, was reported to have said that there was no real alternative to meritocracy in Singapore. Instead, "the challenge for us is to improve our system of meritocracy" by avoiding excessive competition and winners whose advantages have been ascribed by birth (Singapolitics, 2013).[13]

In the next and last chapter, I will endeavour to examine this assertion, that there are `no real alternatives' in Singapore, a little further. I will aim to do this with the purpose of tilting the ideological light-source a little, so that the shadow system may hopefully, be seen for what it is and not **the problem** that it is often positioned to be. Most of all, my goal is to retain some of what I find beautiful and precious in nurturing and working with young children in Singapore. Academic acceleration should be prevented from taking centrestage in the early childhood years in this nation.

[13] This is not unlike Margaret Thatcher's "There is no alternative" (or TINA) defence of her neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s (Robinson, 2013).

Chapter 6

Reducing Academic Acceleration in the Early Childhood Years

Introduction

The difficulty with notions such as “beautiful” and “precious” however, is not that these terms are invariably subjective but rather that pushing these ideas to their logical end risks the formation of an alternative but equally dominant system (or systems) of thought that might need their own un-archiving in the future! At the same time, the contrasting position – the one that I have based this thesis on - is not always helpful. The idealization of uncertainty and epistemic doubt amongst postmodernists (and poststructuralists like Foucault) can result in `theory for its own sake’ (Bader, 1998). Worse, the postmodern approach of skepticism about tradition, universal truths and hierarchical role-relationships may account for some of the “social pathology… intense feelings of anxiety, cynicism and political hopelessness” associated with modern life (Leary, 1994).

Nonetheless, at the risk of being perceived as epistemologically inconsistent, I believe that the results from this study compel me to state that only a large ideological shift and not simply mere `tweaks’ in the system will reduce the emphasis on academic acceleration for young children in Singapore. A more egalitarian ethos perhaps, is long overdue. Importantly, Condron (2011) has observed how egalitarian countries have higher average achievement, higher percentages of highly skilled students and lower percentages of very low-skilled students than do less egalitarian countries. In his view,

egalitarianism and educational excellence are not incompatible goals in affluent societies.

Whether this shift will take place in the near future in Singapore however, is uncertain. Nonetheless, I believe that it should not stop me from suggesting viable ways in which current policies or practices that sustain or contribute to the magnitude of academic acceleration can be recrafted or reshaped so as to reduce some of its ill-effects on the lives of young children and the surrounding social order. Most of all, I aspire that parents, kindergarten teachers and children be equipped with an alternative discursive regime to interrogate the notions of meritocracy, pragmatism and neoliberalism in their own spheres so that a more balanced upbringing for young Singaporean children may be forged without the overriding sentiment that there is “no choice” in the acceleration game. Ultimately, my hope is to see what I have learnt and discovered `applied’ in the political and sociocultural life of Singaporean families so that effective and positive social, psychological and educational change may be achieved for young children in Singapore.

Reshaping Social, Economic and Educational Policies in Singapore

I believe that there are three ways in which social, economic and educational policies can be reshaped to attenuate the extent of academic acceleration in Singapore. The first revolves around transitions: in particular, the ideological differences across the early childhood and higher systems of schooling in this nation. The second pertains to the need to modify neoliberal economic policies where they infuse, inform and impact educational provisions,

especially for children from the lower SES classes. In my view, such an adjustment will invariably require policy-makers to consider, and act on the urgent need to regulate the enrichment/acceleration market for young children in Singapore.

Transitions and Ideological Coherence.

The *Desired Outcomes of Preschool Education* by the Preschool Unit of Singapore's Ministry of Education (2003, Book I, p.12) state that children should amongst other soft-skill goals, *know what is right and wrong*, *be willing to share and take turns with others*, *be curious and able to explore*, *be comfortable and happy with themselves*, as well as *love their families, friends, teachers and schools*. Whilst these goals are consistent with a child-centred, developmentally appropriate focus, they do not align so comfortably with the broader `messages' that Singaporeans also hear about being competitive, meritocratic, pragmatic and resilient. Indeed, local preschools may not adequately prepare young children for primary school (Sharpe, 1998), given their simultaneous construal as places to `play and learn'.

This tension expresses itself in other ways. The current research revealed that regardless of SES, Singaporean parents will do what they feel is needful and within their means to provide, to accrue their children with a head start. As described earlier, meritocracy as a worldview justifies the actions of higher SES parents and obliges lower SES parents to engage in acceleration practices. Lim-Ratnam (2013) has described it like this,

> "While educators may have crafted a laudable set of desired outcomes, will the sociocultural milieu, represented by the parents, accept and

> embrace these outcomes? We have to consider the sociocultural milieu that has shaped the implemented curriculum of Singapore's education system, which is often characterized as exam-oriented…" (p. 419).

As discussed in Key Finding 5, attempts to reform preschool acceleration in Singapore will not likely be successful unless the ideological light in which this phenomenon has arisen is somehow, recast. Sadly though, the Singapore Ministry of Education has done little to moderate expectations, except to assert that parents should not over-prepare their children for primary school. It has also maintained that preschool education should not be a part of the public education system so as to avoid the "dangerously counterproductive" situation of "too-formal-too-soon" (Masagos, 2010, paragraph 7).

Whilst these responses may seem noble on the surface, they constitute, in my view, the Singapore government's stance that there is "no alternative to meritocracy" for the nation. Rather, the system must be improved, where meritocracy "works for the benefit of all and is consistent with our ideals for a fair and just society" (Singapolitics, 2013). Furthermore, the continued decision to leave early childhood education largely in the hands of the private sector shields the government from taking more welfare-oriented strides towards the needs of young children, especially when these might be needful to reduce the disparities in learning experiences across socioeconomic groups.

Thinkers like Goldthorpe (2012) and Lipsey (2014) have suggested that efforts to increase social mobility in society through discourses such as meritocracy are unlikely to be helpful or effective because social structure is difficult to modify. Promoting social mobility may in fact, be "an unobtainable goal, leastways when operating within the framework of modern capitalist societies" (Lipsey, 2014, p.40). Instead, governments should work at, amongst

other possible solutions, reducing economic inequalities[14], changing the structure of jobs in society so that there are more middle-class occupations available and not attaching blame "to those who end up at the bottom" (Lipsey, 2014, p.42).

Nahai (2013) too, has suggested that there are practical alternatives to stringent forms of meritocratic selection and sifting in school contexts (e.g. during school admission exercises). When comparing the selection processes of Oxford University and the University of California (especially UC Berkeley), she describes the latter's Eligibility in the Local Context (or ELC) programme. In this programme, the top 15% of final-year students at ELC-participating (i.e. most) secondary schools receive letters from the university encouraging them to apply to UC. Nahai regards this as a proactive and systematic method of alerting these young people, successful **in their contexts**, to the possibility of studying at a prestigious institution. The University of California also guarantees the top 9% of students from these schools a place in the UC system if they have met certain requirements (which differ from the standard requirements). What this means, in effect, is that

> "ELC helps to level the playing field between top students from the state's worst-performing schools and those from the best schools, aligning with the notion that achievement is best determined in context" (Nahai, 2013, p.698).

Importantly, the ELC programme provides some very valuable lessons and insights for the Singapore context. For instance, if admission into top secondary schools (and by extension, admission into top junior colleges and universities) is made available to the top 9% of students from both elite **and**

[14] Lipsey suggests taxation although he concedes that this is not always a practical route to take in a globalized world where top executives are able to migrate themselves and their companies easily.

neighbourhood schools, admission becomes less dependent on acceleration practices and the varying frequency and quality of acceleration lessons that children from different homes and SES receive. Moreover, a policy such as ELC communicates a very different message from one that is framed by meritocracy (i.e. the `intelligence plus effort' formula). When consideration is given to context, young children may also be understood in context, and notions such as developmental appropriateness become easier to accommodate in the larger grid of sociocultural beliefs.

Rethinking Neoliberalism in the Global-Local Environment.

Rose (2000) has observed that major economic decisions are being influenced by global trends beyond the reach of nation states. Vandenbroeck (2006) too, has described how rising criticisms of state expenditure on welfare matters have led to withdrawals of state intervention in social concerns. In Singapore, strong neoliberal economic policies have allowed it to become a thriving centre of international repute (Monetary Authority of Singapore, 2016). Competitive educational frameworks have resulted in Singaporean students topping international leagues of academic achievement. Plugged deeply in the global environment, the overriding logic in Singapore is to stay competitive and economically viable. As Woo (2014) writes, "economic growth is the basis for everything and the market the dominant organizing mechanism for achieving growth". In Singapore, terms such as `privatisation', `efficiency' and `choice' are common in public discourse and it is unclear whether shifts in public policy

pertaining to the regulation of private tuition and enrichment centres and/or state provision of early childhood education will actually take place.

In fact, when the Singapore government does intervene in the free market, it seems to adhere to a “progressive political economy” (Woo, 2014), a model that encourages state institutions to exercise a greater role in guiding markets but which is still capitalist in orientation. In late 2015, ECDA confirmed the establishment of a new scheme, the Partner Operator (or POP) programme, that provides funding to private childcare operators when they reduce their current fees to a monthly cap of S$800 and promise to keep future fee increases “affordable for parents” (Early Childhood Development Agency, 2015). In all, 23 Partner Operators were appointed on 19 October 2015. Between them, it was reported that they manage 169 childcare centres with 16,500 places in total (Goy, 2015).

This kind of government interest in public-private partnerships in education has been linked to globalization (Franklin, Bloch & Popkewitz, 2003). In the stiff competition between nations to thrive in the global economy, social provisions are no longer seen as simple entitlements. Instead, self-sufficiency will better maintain and strengthen the country’s economic viability; individuals are still expected to become responsible for their own success.

Singapore’s response to socioeconomic inequalities therefore, is not unlike what Boyles, Carusi & Attick (2009) regard as a distributive kind of social justice. This is in contrast to a form of social justice that seeks to free people from oppression. The first emphasizes the allocation of property; the latter highlights less quantifiable values such as virtues or ideals. Importantly, each of these constitutes a part of the “public good” that social justice seeks to attain.

In my view, schemes such as POP in the early childhood sector will most likely do little to alleviate the ongoing dilemma with regard to wealth inequalities; namely, that higher-income parents will still be able to afford the higher fees in more expensive and exclusive preschool/acceleration settings (and all of the varying `habituses' and forms of symbolic capital that are perpetuated therein). The solution conversely, should be social justice that acts in an emancipatory manner to reduce oppression, "by identifying and eradicating the institutional and individual constructs" that reduce or eliminate democratic freedoms, social recognition and self-respect (Boyles, Carusi & Attick, 2009, p.39-40).

In practical terms, this may require clear policies that mix children from different SES groups in preschools. It may also necessitate efforts to enhance the symbolic capital of children from the lower SES groups by providing avenues and activities that are `culturally rich' rather than simply instructional or accelerative, or in the case of the boys from *Starfruit*, poor-quality tuition lessons at a low cost. For instance, activities like storybook theatre and Lego or coding workshops and even, family-mentor pairings would build cultural capital, as would the re-assignment of award-winning early childhood educators and/or enrichment brands to the geographical areas of Singapore that are less well-off.

Initiatives such as these however, would be difficult to achieve without the nation's commitment to re-calibrate what it regards as `success'. They may not be attainable either, unless the Singapore government decides to take early childhood education (and enrichment programmes) fully under its wing to re-distribute cultural capital, not just material wealth, across the varying SES classes. After all, a typical teacher/company would be disinclined to move to and/or work in a charity or district that is less resourced without clear

justification to do so and/or a strong social-service drive to care for the needy. In the case of teachers, the institutional hurdles pertaining to the daily cost of living in Singapore and/or emotional pressure from family members to maintain a specific occupational status or standard of living may force an idealistic teacher to set such positive aims aside. With the government's backing however, early years' teachers may have a better chance of being paid according to national norms and perhaps even incentivized to take up `hardship posts'.

Regulation of the Acceleration Market.

In their book, *Regulating Private Tutoring for Public Good*, Bray & Kwo (2014) state that tuition centres should be regulated because across the countries in which they are prevalent, the sector exacerbates socioeconomic inequalities, gender inequalities, racial/ethnic inequalities and rural/urban inequalities. They also undermine regular schooling, permit "soft" and harder forms of corruption (e.g. when teachers reduce the coverage of content in their regular lessons to increase the demand for private lessons) and expose consumers and employees to different kinds of vulnerabilities (e.g. tutors may make students feel inadequate to increase demand for their services, part-time tutors may be employed without proper contracts).

Bray & Kwo (2014) also raise the important point that the tutoring industry should be subject to taxation. They further suggest that all companies and centres providing enrichment or tutoring services should be registered and subjected to monitoring, for instance, in the appointment of new managers or

tutors as well as in pricing, hours of operation and advertising. Teachers too, should be prohibited from providing private tutoring to their own students or other students in their own schools.

Importantly, regulating acceleration sites would not be possible without the necessary personnel and finances to do so, and this is where my research supports the need for the Singapore government to take a more instrumental role in achieving "the goal of public good" (Bray & Kwo, 2014, p.62). When acceleration sites are simultaneously geospatial sites for the enactment of socioeconomic inequalities, it becomes crucial for the government to ensure that consumers (and especially, the children involved) are protected. Ideally, this goal of regulation should be accompanied by tangible policy strategies to ensure that the quality of tutoring for children from the low SES classes is as good or even better than the quality of tutoring for children from the higher SES groups. Parents similarly, should be educated and empowered to make the right decisions about what they are paying for and why.

Reshaping Teacher Training in Singapore

Preschool educators in Singapore undergo training and professional development that abide by the following principles – *holistic development and learning*, *integrated learning*, *children as active learners*, *adults as supporters of learning*, *learning through interactions* and *play as a medium for learning* (Ministry of Education, 2003, p.14). These principles are supported by six practices: *starting from the child*, *fostering a positive learning climate*, *thoughtful preparation of the learning environment*, *purposeful planning and structuring of*

learning activities, *carefully chosen and designed resources* and *observing children* (p.26). Unfortunately, in preschool teacher training in Singapore, little attention seems to be paid to political and sociocultural matters.

Kourti & Androussou (2013) have pointed out that if the educational process is a "political act" (Freire, 1973), teachers must be trained to consider the social and cultural background of the children in their classroom and society at large. It becomes essential, in effect, to develop future teachers' `critical awareness' (Mayer, 1986) so as to enable them to read and analyse social reality and then to act using this theoretical knowledge as a tool (Cochran-Smith, 2005). As described by Giroux (2007),

> "Critical pedagogy opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critical agents; it provides a sphere where the unconditional freedom to question and assert is central to the purpose of the university, if not democracy itself" (p.1).

In Singapore though, education tends to avoid tackling hot-button issues although some secondary school textbooks have been revised recently to place a greater emphasis on active citizenship and critical thinking (Goy, 2016). Speaking from their experiences as preschool teacher-trainers in Greece, Kourti & Androussou (2013) have observed that there is a dominant perception still that young children's education should steer clear of politics.

Like Kourti & Androussou (2013), I believe that teachers undergoing training should "become open to new ideas". Furthermore, for this to happen, "it is necessary to create a state of conflict that challenges their existing preconceptions" (p.197). Only then can we expect "a change in individual perspectives and the way reality is understood" (p.198).

Notwithstanding this hope that more opportunities may be developed to increase the critical literacy of preschool teachers in Singapore, the challenge remains in having the trainees “make it their own” (Kourti & Androussou, 2013, p.200). Indeed, these authors note that trainees undergoing critical training may become destabilized. They may become uncertain about their ability to escape a homogenized view of knowledge and knowledge transmission. Nonetheless, this should not stop us trying to effect change through teacher training. It is important that their voices, and the voices of the children in their care, are heard.

Reshaping Conversations with Parents, Preschool Children and Kindergarten Teachers in Singapore

My research revealed that Singaporean parents, kindergarten teachers and children are vulnerable to the effects of “governmentality”, especially where beliefs such as meritocracy and pragmatism were often assumed to be true, unavoidable and/or natural and thus, the entrenched and longstanding practices of academic acceleration too. In order to encourage more confident and informed ways of speaking out, of talking about the quality of their lives and the direction that they want these to take, I believe that Singapore (and Singaporeans) would benefit from having a political literacy that centres on democracy, social justice and equity (Carr & Thésée, 2008). Importantly, these values must,

> “resonate with all sectors in society, not just those able to financially find a place at the decision-making table” (p.177).

Political literacy in action would also include abilities such as:

a) *Refusing* (the different discourses that are being infused into our minds continuously);

b) *Re-questioning* (certainty and rigidities);

c) *Re-defining* (formal traits of knowledge) and

d) *Re-affirming* (the self and collective self in the multifarious connections that we have with each other)

(Thésée, 2006).

It should result then in a people who can think and act outside of sophisticated media systems and include young children making sense of socio-political issues like environmental concerns (e.g. Wilson, 1996) or matters of race (e.g. Hirschfeld, 1995). Indeed, young children need not (and should not) be excluded from these conversations. In the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy, young children are encouraged to – because they can – share perspectives in multi-way interactions (Nimmo, 1998; Kang, 2007).

Importantly, Carr & Thésée (2008) point out that there is evidence demonstrating that political literacy can improve academic outcomes, enhance the culture and experience of education and reduce high dropout rates, especially amongst marginalized groups (e.g. Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004; Ryan, 2006). In practice however, their research has unearthed systems that undermine the direct and indirect processes that support critical thinking and action to influence and modify the environment. Carr (2006) suggests that this is because the development of political literacy can easily be equated with indoctrination, or decision-makers believe that the goal of education is to help students become workers/employees in a market-based economy! Such is the irony.

Notwithstanding these hurdles, parents, kindergarten teachers and citizens should understand that the meritocratic system is not suitable for the needs of knowledge-based economies (Appold, 2001). These require a broad base of workers who each have a high level of skill in a specific domain. More than that, Hursh & Henderson (2011) make a good point when they say that,

> "rather than a self-perpetuating neoliberalism in which individuals are responsible only for themselves and all decisions are supposedly made by the market, we have responsibility for our relationships with one another…" (p.171).

In other words, entertaining the idea of policy alternatives and working hard at their implementation are moral actions, not just attempts at reconciling or creating a harmony within the physical scheme of things (Berry, 1999).

Tangible strategies to achieve voice and equity are not impossible to find or put into practice. Hawkins (2014) cites her own doctoral work and studies such as Siraj-Blatchford & Clark (2000) that report on the successful use of children's literature to promote and support teaching for social justice and inclusion in the preschool years. Significantly, if critical discourse becomes available and acceptable when children are younger, then bottom-up change in society through the subsequent years of the human life-span becomes possible and in fact, natural too.

Conclusion

Ball (1993) writes that public policies create circumstances that tell us how the range of options available to us have narrowed or changed, or what new or specific goals/outcomes are. An appropriate response to such policies however, must still be constructed. Significantly, such responses must involve

creative social action that require - amongst other things like commitment, capability and resources - a sufficient degree of inter-textual compatibility.

In Singapore, the national pledge that aims “to build a democratic society, based on justice and equality, so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation” does hold, within its clauses, an inherent tension, but more so when policies and practices associated with a neoliberal order and unfettered meritocracy begin to embody a set of problems to their subjects (Ball, 1993). In Ball’s view, responses characterized by productive thought, invention and adaptation can be very helpful. Quoting Riseborough (1992), he points out that there is often “an empirically rich under-life to policy intention” (p.37). We cannot react to policies as simply read-off from texts. Rather, policies are subject to constraint and agency, as well as their mutual effects on each other.

Where does this lead (or leave) me then? I believe, on a positive note. Education must act on education, not for education’s sake but for those who depend on it, and by those pursue it with idealism. The kind of history that we have had about preschool academic acceleration in Singapore need not be its future or reiterated past. Mills (2003) contends that the human being “is the `place’ where power is enacted and the place where it is resisted” (p.35). If so, then that place must begin with me. As Carr & Thésée (2008) so eloquently put it, I must strive

> “… to reinforce political literacy and transformational change in education in a sustained, systemic and liberating way” (p.186).

But this would not have been possible without first having been transformed myself; and by education, no less.

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Appendix 1

A Brief History of Education in Singapore

The People's Action Party has governed Singapore since 1959, the year it was allowed to hold its first general election upon independence from the British. Since then, the party has won all general elections. Its preference is for ideas to manifest themselves through policies rather than theoretical manifestos (People's Action Party, 2016). Accordingly, national policies about education have been crafted along the lines of the PAP government's view of the world and Singapore's place in it.

One such policy is the Compulsory Education Act, which was implemented in Singapore in 2003. Its two key objectives are to give Singaporean children aged 6 and above:

a) A common core of knowledge that will provide a strong foundation for further education and training to prepare them for a knowledge-based economy; and

b) A common educational experience that will help to build national identity and cohesion

(Ministry of Education, 2016a).

Many Singaporeans accept the necessity of the Compulsory Education Act without reservation. It is quite ironic however that in 1965, the Minister of Education for that period, Ong Pang Boon, was reported to have commented that the people of Singapore are "so education conscious that we have achieved universal primary education without making it compulsory…." (The

Straits Times, 1965). There must have been other reasons at play for the government to have felt it necessary in 2003 (some 40 years later) to ratify compulsory education for all Singaporean children. Notwithstanding, it is sufficient to note for the moment that the Compulsory Education Act constructs educational goals (and Singaporean students) in two main ways. First, students are regarded as future workers to contribute to the economic well-being of the country and second, education is needed for its role in shaping students into future citizens with a shared identity and common goals.

Significantly, these aims have historical roots. Singapore has been described as an insecure nation by many observers and critics. In the words of its founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew,

> "Never had I expected that in 1965, at 42, I would be in charge of an independent Singapore, responsible for the lives of its two million people. From 1959, when I was 35, I was prime minister of a self-governing state of Singapore. We joined the Federation of Malaysia in September 1963. There were fundamental disagreements over policies between Singapore and the federal government. All of a sudden, on 9 August 1965, we were out on our own as an independent nation. We had been asked to leave Malaysia and go our own way with no signposts to our next destination.
>
> We faced tremendous odds with an improbable chance of survival. Singapore was not a natural country but man-made, a trading post the British had developed into a nodal point in their world-wide maritime empire. We inherited the island without its hinterland, a heart without a body"
>
> (Lee, 2000, p.19).

More than a decade later, when questioned by a journalist why he was "always living in fear of a catastrophe", Lee's words were these,

> "I'm concerned that Singaporeans assume that Singapore is a normal country… We are in a very turbulent region. If we do not have a government and a people that differentiate themselves from the rest of the neighbourhood in a positive way and can defend ourselves, Singapore will cease to exist…. We have not got neighbours who want to help us prosper…. We are not vulnerable? They can besiege you. You'll be dead. Your sea lanes are cut off and your business comes to a halt"
>
> (Lee, 2011b, pp.25-27).

Primarily because of Lee's construction of Singapore as a vulnerable country always at risk of defeat either militarily or economically, many national policies – including those pertaining to education – were crafted to ameliorate anticipated problems. Goh and Gopinathan (2008) describe how in the 1960s, "an intimate link between education and economic development of the small city-state was strongly emphasized" (p.14). They explain that the government aimed at developing new skills and work attitudes to accommodate new economic strategies. At the same time, socializing young Singaporeans to develop a common identity through a national education system was seen as a key condition for economic survival.

Why compulsory education did not include provisions for preschoolers in the 1960s was probably the result of many practical considerations. For one, secondary education was seen as being the most profitable investment (Pang, 1982). The rate of return to society after completing secondary education was 18.2 percent for males and 17.0 percent for females. Additionally, there was the matter of limited funding from state revenue as well as ensuring that there were enough teachers and textbooks for all schools and students (Goh & Gopinathan, 2008). Finally, the priority of economic survival could never be ignored, so when the Ministry of Finance concluded in 1968 that there was an insufficient number of technically trained workers to meet the requirements of new industries, a focus was given to technical education and the Vocational and Industrial Training Board (or VITB), the predecessor of the current Institute of Technical Education (ITE), was created (Goh & Gopinathan, 2008, p.19-20).

Nevertheless, branches of the People's Action Party did set up kindergartens in the early 1960s to help prepare children for entry into primary

schools (PAP Community Foundation, 2016). These classes were seen as an act of social charity and a utilitarian precursor to formal education. They were conducted in any space available - from `wayang' (street opera) stages to shophouses. Currently, the PAP Community Foundation (or PCF) comprises 1 headquarters and 87 branches, each of which consists of between 1 to 8 learning centres. These centres provide kindergarten, childcare, student care and aged care services.

At the same time, it is equally important to note that on the international stage, preschool education was largely ignored until the first UNESCO *World Conference on Education for All* in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. Here, it was pointed out that

> "… attention to the physical and psychosocial development of young chidren often enhances their ability to benefit from schooling, thereby increasing efficiency within the school system. Second, the positive effects on school performance… has been shown in many cases to be more significant for girls than boys, and for children from disadvantaged social groups than those from more affluent homes. Thus, early child development can have a substantial equity effect.... So long as such programmes are only available to higher income groups, however, they may have the effect of further advantaging those groups, thus increasing inequities in learning achievement"
>
> (The Inter-Agency Commission for the WCEFA, 1990, p.30).

Unfortunately, the historical omission of preschool education from state funding and governance has become so deeply rooted in Singapore that in spite of public feedback and calls from non-partisan humanitarian organizations to re-think this policy, many parliamentary debates and replies have simply served to reiterate the prevailing view that preschool provision should not be nationalized. In year 2000, Dr Aline Wong, then Senior Minister of State for Education, said,

> "Simply pouring money into PSE [preschool education] will not raise quality automatically. We must carefully decide how to deploy resources so that most children can get the most value out of preschool education…. I want to emphasise that MOE will not take over PSE. The provision of PSE will remain firmly in the hands of the private and people sectors. There is merit in allowing different centres with different philosophies and schools of thought to offer different types of PSE. It will also encourage creative innovation as each centre strives to meet the needs of its unique pupil profile"
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2000).

Similarly, in a January 2010 parliamentary reply to a Member of Parliament who had asked whether pre-primary education would be made compulsory for all, then Minister of Education, Dr Ng Eng Hen, stated,

> "The main focus in preschool should primarily take into account the developmental needs of young children and provide age-appropriate programmes. Nationalising preschools to be part of the formal school system runs the risk of an over-emphasis on academic instruction and uniformity. It will increase pressure to accelerate preschool children's numeracy and literacy skills at the expense of other developmental goals…. Indeed a nationalized preschool sector would tend towards conformity, which is not ideal. It would deprive parents the ability to choose from a variety of early childhood care and education models and operators that best fits the needs of their child"
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Whilst seemingly sound and rational, this insistence on keeping preschool education in the realm of commercial providers and non-profit organizations (including madrasahs/mosque kindergartens and church kindergartens) belies an uneasy tension between form and outcomes. It flies in the face of statistical evidence that the cost of private provision in the preschool years is "one of the factors that contributes most to inequity in access" (UNESCO, 2014, p.45). This *EFA Global Monitoring Report* further states that in many parts of the world, governments "have yet to assume responsibility for pre-primary education: as of 2011, private providers were catering for 33% of all enrolled children."

In 2012, the Lien Foundation, a Singapore-based philanthropic organization, commissioned the Economist Intelligence Unit (or EIU) to devise an index to rank preschool provision across 45 countries encompassing the OECD and major emerging markets. This *Starting Well* study considered the relative availability, affordability and quality of preschool environments and Singapore emerged 29 out of 45 overall when the Index was finally released. The study pointed out that many high-income countries ranked poorly in spite of having the wealth to deliver preschool services. Singapore was one of the countries listed in the lower half of the Index despite having high average per-capita incomes (The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2012, p.6).

In the same year, the Lien Foundation released another study called *Vital Voices* that noted that in spite of many new government initiatives, early childhood care and education remains a challenging area in Singapore. It pointed out that although the government had taken steps to accelerate change in the sector (including providing subsidies for children from low-income families and more generic policies to raise the quality of the early years workforce), preschool provisions remain fragmented. There are still significant underlying issues to be addressed such as the shortage of qualified preschool teachers, high turnover in the workforce and inequalities in terms of the affordability, accessibility and quality of preschool services (Ang, 2012, p.16).

Appendix 2

"A Fair, Not Welfare, Society" and Its Impact on Early Education

In Singapore, buying and selling goods and services is a "normal" part of life. It is largely unquestioned, although debates for or against the privitization of healthcare, transport services and early childhood education have taken place before. Significantly, beliefs in the "rightness" of private enterprise cannot be easily separated from the deeper political agenda of the People's Action Party.

The aim of the ruling party has always been to create a "fair", not "welfare" society. As recounted by Lee Kuan Yew in his memoirs (2000), the rationale for such a decision was purely pragmatic and justified by the experiences of other countries that had failed to manage the idealism of socialism effectively.

> "Watching the ever increasing costs of the welfare state in Britain and Sweden, we decided to avoid this debilitating system. We noted by the 1970s that when governments undertook primary responsibility for the basic duties of the head of a family, the drive in people weakened. Welfare undermined self-reliance. People did not have to work for their families' wellbeing. The handout became a way of life. The downward spiral was relentless as motivation and productivity went down. People lost the drive to achieve because they paid too much in taxes. They became dependent on the state for their basic needs.
>
> We thought it best to reinforce the Confucian tradition that a man is responsible for his family – his parents, wife and children. We used to face frequent criticism and attacks from opposition parties and the Western media, through their correspondents in Singapore, for pursuing such hard-hearted policies and refusing subsidies for consumption. It was difficult to counter the seductiveness of welfare promises by the opposition during elections. In the 1960s and '70s, the failure of the European welfare state was not yet self-evident. It took two generations for the harm to work its way through and be seen in lowered performance of individuals, sluggish growth rates and growing budget deficits…. It was fortunate that I was able to withstand these criticisms in successive

> elections until the 1980s when the failure of the welfare state was acknowledged by the Western media" (pp.126-127).

Low & Vadaketh (2014) have argued however, that the Singapore government,

> "typically frames the welfare state as a system that encourages collective sloth and dependence on the state, undermines the work ethic and individual and familial responsibility, and erodes national vigour and economic competitiveness. But a careful study of welfare states around the world does not support such a stark conclusion. There is little evidence to show that a country's economic growth prospects or its competitiveness are influenced by the size of the welfare state or levels of social spending. Neither is there much evidence to suggest that innovation or productive levels are lower in developed countries with higher welfare spending.
>
> Much of the discourse surrounding "welfare" in Singapore reflects the PAP's ideology rather than a comprehensive study of its adverse economic impacts in other countries… welfare states have often adapted and found ways of designing incentive-compatible policies that do not produce the perverse, undesired consequences commonly cited by the PAP government" (p.10).

Indeed, Low (2014a) points out that these myths about the welfare state shroud almost every discussion of inequality in Singapore and act as an "ideological blinker" (p.28). Government policies (and reforms, when made) still reflect longstanding beliefs about "vulnerability, meritocracy, elite governance, economic growth and technocratic rationalism" (Low & Vadaketh, 2014a, p.x).

Importantly, the outworking of these notions has had an impact on education in the early years too. Soon after a drop in voter sentiment for the PAP in the 2011 general elections and following the publication of the *Starting Well* index by the Lien Foundation (The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2012), the Ministry of Education initiated a number of changes to the way it manages preschools in Singapore. Unfortunately, these changes appeared to

be mere concessionary tweaks to the PAP's consistent ideological stance on neoliberalism as a guiding principle for the country.

It announced, for one, that it would invest S$290 million in the preschool sector from 2012 to 2017 in addition to the S$150 million it had already invested in the previous five years. The average annual figure of S$44 million from this spending however, weighs poorly (i.e. 0.38%) against the S$11.6 billion allocated to all other education sectors in the financial year 2013 alone (Government of Singapore, 2013). To put these numbers into greater perspective, Singapore registered a primary fiscal surplus of S$3.86 billion in 2012 and S$2.42 billion in 2013 (Government of Singapore, 2013a).

In addition, the government appeared to send the message that it would not reduce marketization of the sector, rather enhance it. It announced that it would set up 15 MOE kindergartens over the next three years to

> "provide quality preschool education that is affordable to Singaporeans as well as to pilot teaching and learning resources and establish good practices for sharing with the preschool sector"
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2014a).

It acted, in other words, to harness the forces of the free-market and compel all other preschools in the sector to enhance the quality and affordability of its provisions, even if this meant allowing some private and not-for-profit preschools to shut down because of reduced intakes of students or the sheer impossibility of securing sufficient teachers for their classrooms. The establishment of more kindergartens in an already fragmented sector will invariably increase competition for human resources (i.e. teachers) and physical space, two constraints that have always been present in this small city-state.

MOE kindergartens are nestled in the HDB heartlands, within community spaces and primary schools where "collaboration can thrive" (Ministry of

Education, 2013b). HDB refers to the Housing and Development Board that builds government flats in which 80% of Singaporeans live (Housing & Development Board, 2016). Resonating with the aims of the Compulsory Education Act, MOE kindergartens

> "aim to nurture children holistically so that they are self-confident, can interact well with others and have foundational literacy and numeracy skills. This will ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to thrive in the 21st century while enabling them to build a strong Singapore identity and heartbeat."
>
> (Ministry of Education, 2013c).

Unfortunately, the Ministry has not simultaneously clarified on how these kindergartens will differ from the preschools run by the PCF (the People's Community Foundation) or other voluntary welfare organizations that seek to serve underprivileged children in Singapore. Neither has it explained how much of the S$290 million will be used to finance the set-up and operation of these MOE kindergartens. Instead, by disbursing the S$440 million through administrative and operational structures as opposed to direct subsidies to children or families, the government persists in its aim to define and limit the boundaries of any token so that it is not misconstrued as "welfare".

Appendix 3

Sample Information Leaflet (to Parent)

1 April 2013

Dear Sir / Mdm

RE: Doctoral Research Study

My name is Denise Chua Mei Ling and I am studying for a Doctor of Education (EdD) degree at the Institute of Education, University of London. The degree will be dually awarded by the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

In fulfilment of the doctoral programme, I am working on a research dissertation entitled A Critical Study of Academic Acceleration in the Early Childhood Years in Singapore.

I would like to ask for your permission to interview you and your child(ren).

The period of participation will be in April - May 2013.

Purpose of my Research Project
Essentially, my research involves the study of what children and their parents say about academic acceleration in the early childhood years. In particular, it seeks to understand why parents enrol their children in enrichment or tuition programmes[15] outside of regular preschool or kindergarten hours. It hopes to draw links, if any, to overarching public/national policies about education in Singapore.

Study/Research Procedures and what will happen to Information gathered during the Study
The research will involve 10 (ten) parent-child pairs from various learning centres/organizations. Data/Information will be collected in a number of ways:

a) With the informed consent of the centre/organization, the researcher will record (either visually or through written notes) lessons in the child's centre/classroom, in order to collect three to five (3 - 5) twenty-minute (20 minute) segments of interest;
b) With the child's informed consent, he/she will be asked to draw a map of the centre/classroom;
c) He/she will also be asked to draw pictures of whatever he/she finds interesting about the centre (e.g. friends, teachers or classroom);
d) The child will be given a camera and asked to take photographs of whatever he/she finds interesting about the centre (e.g. displays, material resources, etc.).
e) The researcher will subsequently interview the child about the maps, drawings and photographs, as well as ask him/her to comment on the observed lesson-segments;
f) The researcher will also interview the child's parent so that his/her comments and perspectives about the observed segments, maps, drawings and photographs may be obtained.

[15] For the purpose of my study, enrichment and tuition programmes are regarded as similar entities because they usually have an accelerative intent or purpose.

The interviews will be audiotaped (to allow for written transcriptions and analyses afterward). Written notes will be taken to capture primary information and for later review. Each interview is scheduled to take approximately 2 hours, over two separate occasions to complete.

The process of transcription will be as follows: Interviews will be recorded and the recordings will subsequently be transcribed (by a research assistant) into a soft-copy. The recordings and transcriptions will be stored securely in the researcher's personal laptop computer. **The identities and confidentiality of all centres/organizations, research participants and collected data will be protected.** The research assistant involved in the study will be required to sign a written undertaking to protect the confidentiality of the data collected, and the privacy of all centres/organizations and participants.

Information pertaining to centres/organizations and the personal information of participants will be de-identified/coded as far and as early as possible, and will be stored and transferred as de-identified/coded information. The names of centres/organizations and participants will be kept confidential and their identities will **not** be used in the reporting of the research data nor in any intended publication of any sort, be it electronic or print media. Pseudonyms will be used instead. All records containing personal information will remain confidential and no information that could lead to the identification of any centre/organization or individual will be released.

All research data compiled during the study will be stored securely in a book cupboard in my personal study for a period of 2 (two) years following the completion of the research. After that time, all data will be destroyed. The data will be protected against loss or theft and unauthorized access, disclosure, copying, use and modification. Security measures will include restricted access (i.e. password protected or placed under lock and key).

It is envisaged that the data gathered during the research will be analyzed and incorporated in a thesis that will be submitted to the Institute of Education (University of London) for examination. The research findings from this study will be summarized in a written brief and provided to the centres/organizations and participants. The report may appear in summarized form as a newspaper article. Research findings from this study may also be presented in a conference and published in a journal, conference proceeding or other scholarly avenue.

Your Participation
Participation in this study is fully voluntary. You and your child will be asked to sign an informed consent form before commencing participation.

You are free to withdraw yourself and/or your child from participating in this study at any time prior to publication without penalty, prejudice, negative consequences, repercussion or disadvantage (to you or to your child and/or the centre or organization). Your decision to withdraw from this study will be kept confidential. Upon withdrawal, all data obtained from you and associated with you will be erased and destroyed.

There is no foreseeable risk arising from you or your child participating in this study. I do not anticipate a risk of psychological/emotional harm that is beyond the normal experience of everyday life, in either the short or long term, from any person's participation in this project. If anyone feels uncomfortable at any point during the course of the research study, he/she should let me know immediately.

Importantly, your privacy will be protected and nothing will be published that will identify you or your child. **The information learnt will not be used for commercial gain.**

If you would like a summary of the research findings from this study or a copy of the final research report/paper published, please tell me so that I can arrange to provide you with a copy.

Ethical issues
This project has received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Education, University of London.

Signature: …… **Date**: ……

Appendix 4

Sample Information Letter (to Child)

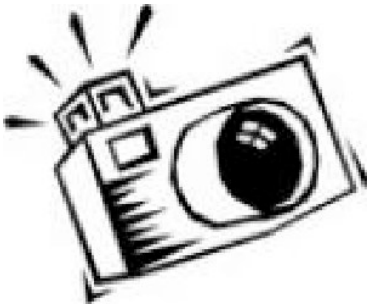
Hi! My name is Denise.

I am a researcher.

That means I am trying to answer a question.

My question is,
"What do children say about enrichment lessons?"

Can you tell me?
If you can, I would love to hear from you!



You can tell me using words, photographs and drawings. I will watch or videotape you in class too. You can tell me about the lesson.

When you talk to me, I will use a recorder. That means I can play back what you say and think about it.

Whatever you tell me will be a secret. That means I will not tell others what YOU have said. I will not tell them your real name.

I will not tell them where you stay or where you go to school. It will be CONFIDENTIAL. When I write my report, I will give you another name! Would you like that?

Please tell your Mum or Dad if you can help me!
My number is ----3920 or you can email me at
----@gmail.com

Please sign here if you agree:

My Name: _____

My Signature: _____

The Date: _____

Thank you very much!

Appendix 5

Sample Consent Form (Parent)

I, _____ (name of parent), of _____ (NRIC No.) hereby consent to participate in the research project undertaken by **Denise Chua Mei Ling** from the Institute of Education London for her final Doctoral dissertation.

I understand that the project is designed to gather information about supplementary academic activities for preschool children in Singapore.

I will be one of approximately 10 parents being interviewed for this study. The project will require Denise Chua Mei Ling to interview my child too. Each interview will last approximately 1 to 2 hours. Every interview will be audiotaped and transcribed afterwards. Ms Chua may take written notes during the interview. If anyone does not wish to be taped, he/she will not be able to participate in this study.

Prior to interviewing, Ms Chua will record (either visually or through written notes), segments of interest from the lessons my child receives at _____ (name of learning centre/organization). She will encourage my child to draw a map of the centre/classroom, take photographs and/or draw pictures about the lessons/centre.

I understand that my participation (and the participation of my child) in this project is voluntary. I understand that I (and my child) will not be paid for participating. I (and my child) may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I (or my child) feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I (and my child) have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

I understand that the researcher will not identify me (or my child) by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my (and my child's) confidentiality as participants in this study will remain secure.

Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data-use policies that protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions. The information will not be used for commercial gain.

No one other than Ms Chua will be present at the interview. Only Ms Chua and her research assistant will have access to raw notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my (and my child's) individual comments from being taken out of context.

I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Institute of Education, University of London. For concerns regarding this research, the Committee may be contacted through Dr PJ: ----J@ioe.ac.uk

I have read and I understand the explanations provided to me. I have had all of my questions answered to my satisfaction.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I voluntarily agree for my child to participate in this study.

I have been given a copy of this consent form.

_____ _____

My Signature **Date**

_____

My Printed Name

Appendix 6

Sample Personal Survey Form (for Parents)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study:
A Critical Study of Academic Acceleration in the Early Childhood Years in Singapore

Please tell me a little bit about yourself and your family.

You are the:

☐ Daddy ☐ Mummy

You are:

☐ 20 – 24 years old ☐ 25 – 29 years old ☐ 30 – 34 years old

☐ 35 – 39 years old ☐ 40 – 44 years old ☐ 45 – 49 years old

You work as a: _____.

Your spouse works as a: _____.

You live in a:

☐ HDB Flat ☐ Private Condominium ☐ House

Your first child is a ☐ boy ☐ girl

He/she is: _____ years old.

He/she attends: _____ kindergarten / preschool / childcare.

_____ primary / secondary school.

He/she also attends the following enrichment classes (please list all):

Your second child[16] is a ☐ boy ☐ girl

He/she is: _____ years old.

He/she attends: _____ kindergarten / preschool / childcare.

_____ primary / secondary school.

He/she also attends the following enrichment / tuition classes (please list all):

---

[16] Space on extra sheets of paper was provided for as many children as the parent had.

Appendix 7: Time-Line and Findings of Pilot Projects

Year	Paper	Epistemological Frame	Ontological Elements	Findings	Limitations
2010	Educational Research II: Discursive Psychology as Analytic Method to study Academic Acceleration in the Preschool Years	Constructionist	Discourse: Talk and Text - studied for their social actions	Two main interpretative repertoires: 1. Acceleration is a necessary evil 2. Acceleration is a beneficial activity	1. Only two mothers were interviewed 2. Need to explore what preschool teachers and primary school teachers say about acceleration 3. More nodes of triangulation needed including naturalistic data
2011	Institution-Focused Study: Parental Talk about Academic Acceleration in the Early Childhood Years	Constructionist	Language construed as constitutive, situated and performative; analysed for its role in `positioning' self and others	1. Parents positioned themselves as reasonable and responsible 2. Children imputed as needing acceleration for its benefits 3. Other children positioned as benchmarks 4. Other parents positioned as resources of information and yardsticks to compare against or resist 5. Preschools have a different role to play from tuition centres 6. Primary school is difficult and risky (pedagogical discontinuities between preschool and primary school) 7. Future success requires present diligence	1. Small sample of three mothers and from one demographic profile (high-income) only 2. Children's voices missing 3. Difficulties in defining "over-preparedness" (what is developmentally inappropriate) 4. External examiner remarked that "candidate did not develop a stronger critical stance, but it is evident that she is capable of doing this… social justice issues should be considered… using critical sociology and/or poststructural theory for analyzing and engaging with power issues"

Appendix 8: Design of the Study

Research Question / Topic	Research Method	Sample Interview Questions
Academic acceleration as outcome of "governmentality" including ideological reproduction, technologies of power and technologies of the self	a) Parent survey b) Participant observations c) Information sources (e.g. Ministry press releases, parliamentary debates) d) Interviews with twelve (three SES groups of) parents and their children e) Interviews with children's kindergarten teachers	a) Why did you enroll (child) in this class/programme? *or* Why did Mummy/Daddy enroll you in this class/programme? *or* Why do you think (parent) enrolled (child) in this class/programme? b) Are you excited about (him/her) going to primary school? Why or why not? c) Do you think (he/she/you) is/are ready to go to primary school? Why or why not? d) (About observed class incident) Tell me what happened, how you feel/felt, what you did and why (or wanted to do and why). e) Tell me about the (your) enrichment class teacher.
Academic acceleration where linked to social class reproduction including matters relating to "habitus" and "capital"	a) Parent survey b) Participant observations c) Information sources (e.g. newspaper articles) d) Interviews with twelve (three SES groups of) parents and their children e) Interviews with children's kindergarten teachers	a) Why did you enroll (child) in this class/programme? *or* Why did Mummy/Daddy enroll you in this class/programme? *or* Why do you think (parent) enrolled (child) in this class/programme? b) Are you excited about (him/her) going to primary school? Why or why not? c) Do you think (he/she/you) is/are ready to go to primary school? Why or why not? d) (About observed class incident) Tell me what happened, how you feel/felt, what you did and why (or wanted to do and why). e) Tell me about the (your) enrichment class teacher.
Presence of silenced, marginalized or subjugated knowledges	a) Participant observations b) Interviews with parents, children and kindergarten teachers	a) Do you like the class/lessons? Why? b) Are there any other kinds of lessons/programmes that you would like (him/her) to attend?
		Nodes of Observation
Effects of "governmentality" and social class reproduction seen in enacted practices and other ways	a) Parent survey b) Participant observations - Contextualization - Non-judgmental orientation - Field notes - Outcroppings - Written and electronic information (e.g. brochures and/or websites)	a) Similarities and differences b) Enactments of "governmentality" c) Symbols of social class d) Expressions of academic acceleration (e.g. worksheets; length of time spent in lessons per session/day/week)

Appendix 9

Declaration by Research Assistant

I, _____ (Name of Research Assistant), of NRIC No. _____ will protect the confidentiality of the data that I have transcribed. I will protect the privacy of the individuals interviewed, and will not allow any information relating to their identities or their views/comments to be released to third parties unless appropriate permissions are given by the participants themselves or are required by law.

I further promise to delete both the audio and transcribed files from my personal computer after six (6) months (i.e. _____). I will not use the data for any reason without the explicit permission of the principal investigator and the participants.

_____

Signature of Research Assistant / Date

_____

Signature of Principal Investigator / Date

Appendix 10

Sample Extract from Conversation with Parent

D and SNM

1006	*SNM*	… the problem is that I cannot control what happens
1007		between six and eighteen and when they hit university.
1008		In the sense that I know that my kids are going into the
1009		Singapore school system where the kids are already of a
1010		high numerical ability and language ability. And I
1011		cannot afford to take, you know, the view that my child
1012		is going to European schools where they are with their
1013		kids. I think where we are at right now in Singapore is
1014		that we are trying to keep the kids up with their peers so
1015		that from a confidence standpoint, they have no issue.
1016		They don't feel as if they are stupid, they don't feel as if
1017		their classmates are going to grant them as stupid. All
1018		the teachers are not going to neglect them as stupid,
1019		simply because we didn't prepare them.
1020	*D*	Mmm.
1021	*SNM*	Right?
1022	*D*	Mmm.
1023		If Singapore society gets to a point where it says fine, I
1024		am fine for all the kids to be evened out at seventeen,
1025		eighteen when they hit university, and I am fine for all
1026		the kids to be, you know, not being numerically-aware
1027		or language-aware at, until they are about seven or
1028		eight. Then fine. I am fine to move my kids with their
1029		peers but I will still nevertheless not waste their time –
1030	*D*	Mmm.
1031		- from 0 to 6 when I <u>know</u> that research has shown that
1032		that's the greatest development time.
1033	*D*	Mmm.

Appendix 11

Sample Extract from Conversation with Child

D and SN

214	*D*	Oh my goodness. What else do you do in *Kale*? Can
215		you show me?
216	*SN*	This?
217	*D*	Multiplication? Big, big numbers?
218	*SN*	Yah.
219	*D*	Wow, and you like doing that?
220	*SN*	Yah, kind of easy.
221	*D*	It's easy? So you get a reward after *Kale*?
222	*SN*	Not every day.
223	*D*	Uh-huh. What kind of rewards do you get? And when
224		did you get them?
225	*SN*	Trophies!
226	*D*	((gasps)) You get trophies?
227	*SN*	Yah.
…		
276	*SN*	Show you the (1.0) thing.
277	*D*	The real one? Okay (4.0). This is amazing! This is *Kale*
278		National ASA chart of `three years ahead' given for
279		Mathematics to your brother in kindergarten two and
280		this one's yours. District Mathematics given to S. Oh
281		my goodness↑ Why did you earn this trophy? Can you
282		tell me?
283	*SN*	Er (2.0), it's going level by level.
284	*D*	So if you finish a level you get a trophy like this?
285	*SN*	Yah, this trophy is actually this colour.
286	*D*	Oh, so you got a trophy for doing sums like that?
287	*SN*	Yah.

Appendix 12

Sample Extract from Conversation with Kindergarten Teacher

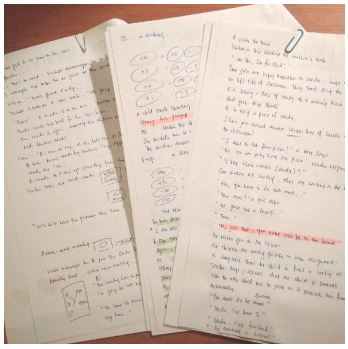
D and SNT

166	*D*	Sure. Do you think, generally, that children need
167		enrichment or tuition in order to be prepared for
168		Primary 1?
169	*SNT*	Um, personal view, no. Because I have seen people – I
170		mean, I have seen children who: do not have tuition and
171		fare just as well, or even better than those who have
172		tuition. For me, I feel that tuition are (sic.) really for
173		those who are slower learners, who needs to be really
174		kept in the same pace as the rest of the other children.
175		Of course in school we can provide that, but because of
176		the (.) the time that they spend in school and the
177		multiple things that they are doing in school, we don't
178		have that much of a one-to-one time with those children
179		who are weak. So, I, I feel that tuitions are really for
180		those who really need help, whether is it they have
181		special needs, you know, learning disabilities, or people
182		who are really slower. But for those children who
183		comes (sic.) from well-educated parents, um, I guess
184		they have a good understanding, but um, good
185		understanding of language. So they are able to
186		understand concepts and everything pretty well, just by
187		underst- listening to the teachers in school.
188	*D*	Mm.
189	*SNT*	So I, I don't think it's necessary, but um, yeah, I guess
190		parents, they have their own views…
…		
214	*SNT*	[Yes.] I feel that most of the parents, they are preparing
215		children for primary school. Um, especially for P1.
…		
666	*SNT*	So for me, the child's well-being is more important.
667	*D*	[Mm.]
668	*SNT*	[So] it's not a hard and fast rule that tuition or

669 enrichment classes are no good. It depends.
670 *D* Mm.
…
696 *SNT* Um (1.0) for me, I feel that it's not necessary for them.
697 But for some reason, um, by not going to the
698 enrichment classes to, to be enriched and it affects their
699 learning, and their, their, I mean, it affects their learning
700 progress or journey, then I mean, surely their parents
701 would need – because I'm not too sure how they are at
702 home.
703 *D* Mm.
704 *SNT* Whether – some kids, if they go – if they don't go for
705 enrichment lesson, they will totally just sit at home and
706 watch TV, and it, it, it does – it doesn't help them in
707 their learning.
708 *D* Mm.
709 *SNT* So, if that is the case, in comparison to watching TV at
710 home, and going to enrichment class, certainly, I would
711 encourage them to go enrichment class.
712 *D* Mm.
713 *SNT* I mean if – unless there's somebody at home, whether
714 it's their parents, who is able to, to help the child learn,
715 not just about academically but socially and emotion
716 stuff, like bringing him to places to understand more –
717 more about people and all, then he doesn't need any
718 enrichment class.
719 *D* Mm.
720 *SNT* So it really depends on how they are at home and all….

Appendix 13

Sample Field Notes



Coconuts

26 April 2013

6.25pm: A group is selecting stationery rewards. J is working, so is K.

After selecting their rewards, the children are asked to go wash their hands.

One child is picking at a wrapper to get at the sweet inside. Ms Li (teacher) helps him.

K does not seem well. Ms Li touches his forehead. She tells him to use the toilet after he's finished with the work.

J is choosing a pen. She has finished her work.

"Okay, after choosing your pen, use the toilet, wash your hands, eat a sweet, then sit down."

"I've chosen one."

"Okay, put it in your bag, then go wash your hands."

6.30pm: I ask Ms Li about the reinforcers/rewards as the boxes are overflowing with candy and stationery items. Ms Li says that she changes the presents once a month.

J runs to the toilet.

Ms Li is very soft-spoken.

"Okay, someone is sick – let's be quiet."

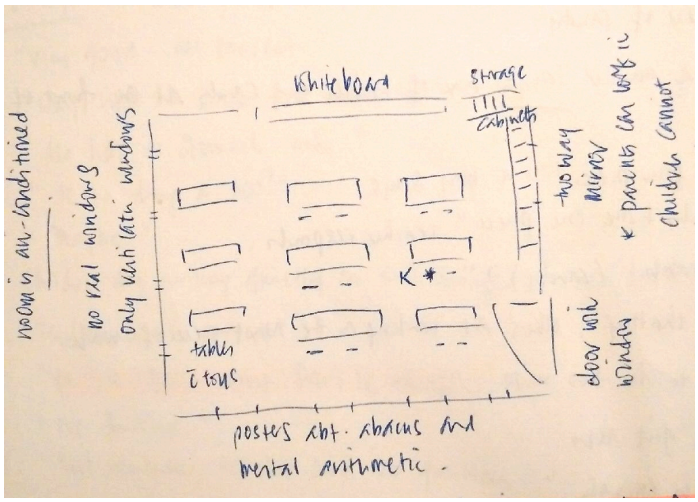
….

6.35pm: The children start on another worksheet.

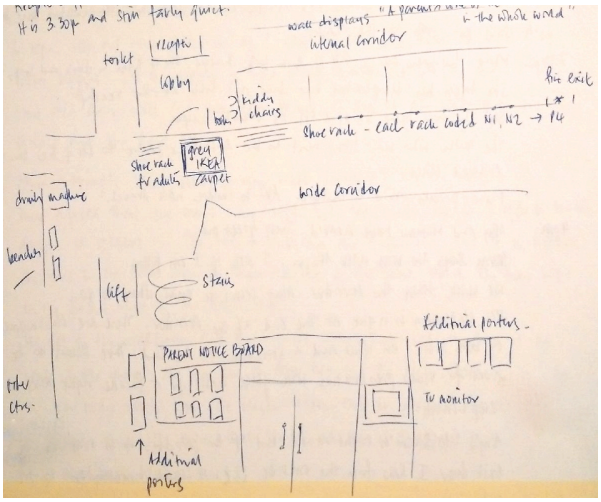
Ms Li is teaching/reciting, "102, 103, 104, 105…" The children copy the numbers in the right squares on their own worksheets.

Appendix 14

Maps and Other Artefacts

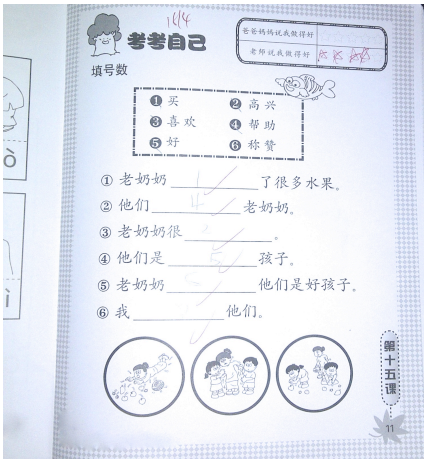


Picture 1 (above): Spatial Layout of Abacus Classroom at *Coconuts*

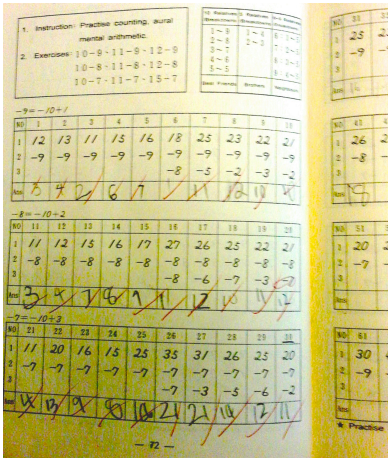


Picture 2 (above): Spatial Layout of Mandarin Classrooms

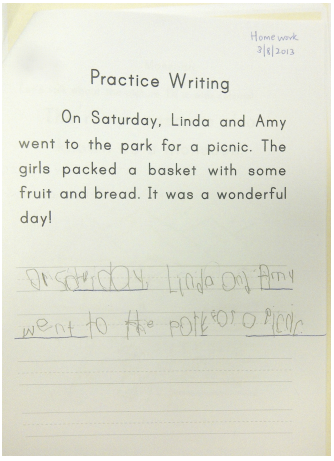
and Drawing of Front Door at *Bananas*



Picture 3 (above): Sample of Mandarin Worksheet from *Bananas*



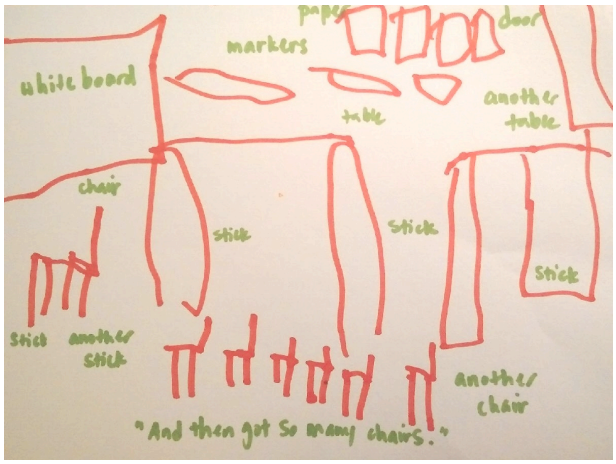
Picture 4 (above): Sample of Abacus Worksheet



Picture 5 (above): Sample of Writing Worksheet from *Lemons*

Appendix 15

Samples of Children's Drawings



Picture 6 (above): Child's Drawing of Classroom at *Starfruit*

Picture 7 (above): Child's Drawing of Classmates at *Zucchini*

Picture 8 (above): Child's Drawing of Enrichment Teachers

at *Coconuts* (top) and *Starfruit* (bottom)

Appendix 16: Parents, Children and their Enrichment Centres *

	Parents	Children	Children's Gender and Ethnicity	Age/Class/Year	Name of Enrichment Centre	Type of Enrichment Centre
1.	AM (Ai's mother)	**Ai**	Female / Multiracial	6 years / K2	*Bananas* – north branch	Private, commercial (Mandarin)
2.	AF (Amit's father)	**Amit**	Male / Indian	6 years / K2	*Starfruit*	Ethnic self-help, non-profit organization (Literacy / Numeracy)
3.	CM (Chun's mother)	**Chun**	Female / Chinese	5 years / K1	*Bananas* – central branch	Private, commercial (Mandarin)
4.	JM (Jade's mother)	**Jade**	Female / Chinese	6 years / K2	*Coconuts*	Private, commercial (e.g. Abacus, Art, Ballet)
5.	KVM1 and KVM2 (Kevin's mums 1 & 2)	**Kevin**	Male / Multiracial	6 years / K2	*Coconuts*	Private, commercial (e.g. Abacus, Art, Ballet)
6.	KM (Kenny's mother)	**Kenny**	Male / Chinese	5 years / K1	*Soursops*	Private, commercial (Japanese brain-stimulation programme)
7.	QM (Qaamar's mum)	**Qaamar**	Female / Malay	3 years / Pre-Nursery	*Lemons*	Private, commercial (English and Mandarin Literacy / Numeracy)
8.	RM (Redford's mum)	**Redford**	Male / Chinese	6 years / K2	*Bananas* – central branch	Private, commercial (Mandarin)
9.	SF (Sachin's father)	**Sachin**	Male / Indian	5 years / K1	*Starfruit*	Ethnic self-help, non-profit organization (Literacy / Numeracy)
10.	SNM (Shan's mother)	**Shan**	Female / Chinese	5 years / K1	*Spinach*	Private, commercial (Math)
11.	VF (Vasu's father)	**Vasu**	Male / Indian	6 years / K2	*Starfruit*	Ethnic self-help, non-profit organization (Literacy / Numeracy)
12.	YM (Yin's mother)	**Yin**	Female / Chinese	5 years / K1	*Zucchini*	Private, commercial (Phonics)

* All names are pseudonyms. A number of enrichment centres mentioned by the participants (e.g. *Kale*, *Raisins*) were additional centres that the children attended.

Appendix 17: The Children's Kindergartens and their Kindergarten Teachers *

	Children	Type of Kindergarten Attending	Teacher Interviewed? (Yes / No)	Name of Kindergarten Teacher	Subject(s) Teaching in Kindergarten
1.	Ai	Private	Yes	AT (Ai's teacher)	Mandarin
2.	Amit	Church-based ^	No °	Not applicable	Not applicable
3.	Chun	Church-based	Yes	CT (Chun's teacher)	English and Math
4.	Jade	Private	Yes	JT (Jade's teacher)	English and Math
5.	Kevin	Private	Yes	KVT (Kevin's teacher)	English and Math
6.	Kenny	Private	Yes	KT (Kenny's teacher)	English and Math
7.	Qaamar	Ethnic self-help organization	Yes +	QT1 and QT2 (Qaamar's teachers)	English, Malay and Math
8.	Redford	Private	Yes	RT (Redford's teacher)	Mandarin
9.	Sachin	Church-based ^	No °	Not applicable	Not applicable
10.	Shan	Private	Yes	SNT (Shan's teacher)	English and Math
11.	Vasu	Church-based	Yes	VT (Vasu's teacher)	English and Math
12.	Yin	PCF #	Yes	YT (Yin's teacher)	English and Math

* All names are pseudonyms.
^ This was the same kindergarten and kindergarten principal.
° The kindergarten principal denied me access to the teachers, giving no reasons for the refusal.
+ Two teachers were interviewed for Qaamar, both the current teacher and the teacher assuming responsibility for the class. They were interviewed simultaneously at their request.
# PCF refers to the PAP Community Foundation, the charity arm of the People's Action Party, the current government of Singapore.

Appendix 18: The Parents, their Ages, Homes and Occupations

SES Group	Child	Parents	Age(s)	Occupation(s)	Home(s)
Lower SES Class	*Amit*	AF (Amit's father)	40-44 years old	Senior supervisor	4-room HDB flat
	Sachin	SF (Sachin's father)	40-44 years old	Warehouse assistant	4-room HDB flat
	Vasu	VF (Vasu's father)	40-44 years old	Supervisor (Cabling)	4-room HDB flat
Middle SES Class	Ai	AM (Ai's mother)	25-29 years old	Housewife	5-room HDB flat
	Jade	JM (Jade's mother)	30-34 years old	Accounts executive	4-room HDB flat
	Kevin	KVM1 and KVM2 (Kevin's mothers 1 & 2)	35-39 years old	Entrepreneurs	HDB flat (size unknown)
	Qaamar	QM (Qaamar's mother)	35-39 years old	Secretary	5-room HDB flat
	Yin	YM (Yin's mother)	35-39 years old	Scheduler	Jumbo HDB flat
Higher SES Class	*Chun*	CM (Chun's mother)	40-44 years old	Lawyer	Private condominium
	Kenny	KM (Kenny's mother)	40-44 years old	Vice-President (Sales)	Landed house
	Redford	RM (Redford's mother)	35-39 years old	Entrepreneur (owner of an online jewellery business)	Private condominium
	Shan	SNM (Shan's mother)	40-44 years old	Lawyer	Private condominium

Appendix 19: Enrichment Centres - Site Analysis

No.	Child's Name	Enrichment Site(s)	Postal District(s)	Geographical Setting (HDB vs. Private)	Learning Space(s)	Activities
1.	Ai	*Bananas* – North branch	73 (District 27)	Leased premises within a community centre situated amongst public HDB flats	Small classroom	N.A.
2.	Amit	***Starfruit***	64 (District 22)	Temporary rented premises within a community centre situated amongst public HDB flats	Large seminar room with adult-sized tables and chairs, all set to the sides for space on the floor	Partial experience-based learning; partial paper-&-pencil
3.	Chun	*Bananas* – Central branch	59 (District 10)	Leased premises on the ground floor of a block of private apartments	Small classroom with no window	N.A.
4.	Jade	***Coconuts***	44 (District 15)	A four-storey commercial building owned by the company providing the abacus class; located in a commercial "hub" surrounded by both private and HDB flats	Small classroom with see-through window for parents	Paper-&-pencil (with abacus)
5.	Kevin	***Coconuts***	44 (District 15)	As above: A four-storey commercial building owned by the company providing the abacus class; located in a commercial "hub" surrounded by both private and HDB flats	Small classroom with see-through window for parents	Paper-&-pencil (with abacus)
6.	Kenny	*Soursops*	31 (District 12)	Leased premises on a high floor of an office building located in a commercial "hub" within an estate of HDB flats	Small classroom	Flashcards and other card manipulatives

- continued -

7.	Qaamar	***Lemons***	20 (District 8)	Leased premises in a shopping (retail) centre cum office block	Classroom with partition doors	Partial experience-based learning; partial paper-&-pencil
8.	Redford	*Bananas* – Central branch	59 (District 10)	As above: Leased premises on the ground floor of a block of private apartments	Small classroom with no window	N.A.
9.	Sachin	***Starfruit***	64 (District 22)	As above: Temporary rented premises within a community centre situated amongst public HDB flats	Large seminar room with adult-sized tables and chairs, all set to the sides for space on the floor	Partial experience-based learning; partial paper-&-pencil
10.	Shan	***Spinach***	59 (District 10)	Leased premises on the ground floor of a block of private apartments	Small classroom with no window	Paper-&-pencil
11.	Vasu	***Starfruit***	64 (District 22)	As above: Temporary rented premises within a community centre situated amongst public HDB flats	Large seminar room with adult-sized tables and chairs, all set to the sides for space on the floor	Partial experience-based learning; partial paper-&-pencil
12.	Yin	*Zucchini*	64 (District 22)	Leased premises in a two-storey commercial building located in a commercial “hub” within an estate of public HDB flats	Small classroom with no window	Partial experience-based learning; partial paper-&-pencil

Appendix 20: Basic Incidence Log of the Children's Speech Functions

SES Group	Child	Reports or States	Expresses Preferences and Dislikes	Disagrees, Resists/Argues	Demands or Asserts	Describes	Asks for Help or Expresses Needs	Gives Instructions	Narrates or Recalls	Redirects or Evades	Explains or Justifies	Boasts	Jokes or Teases	Imagines	Complains	Retorts or Shows Sarcasm
Lower SES Class	Amit	x								x						
	Sachin	x								x						
	Vasu	x								x						
Middle SES Class	Ai		x	x					x		x				x	x
	Jade	x				x				x	x	x				
	Kevin	x	x	x			x			x	x				x	
	Qaamar		x	x		x		x		x	x					
	Yin	x	x	x	x	x				x						
Higher SES Class	Chun		x	x	x		x			x	x		x	x	x	x
	Kenny	x	x	x	x		x			x	x	x	x	x		
	Redford	x	x	x			x	x					x	x	x	x
	Shan				x	x	x		x	x	x		x	x		